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The Limits of Self and Sovereign: Performing Failure in Nabokov's Pale Fire and Rushdie's Midnight Children

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THE LIMITS OF SELF AND SOVEREIGN:
PERFORMING FAILURE IN NABOKOV'S *PALE FIRE* AND RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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ABSTRACT

This project examines Vladimir Nabokov's 1962 novel, *Pale Fire,* and Salman Rushdie's 1981 novel, *Midnight's Children*, in conjunction with literary and political theorists including Mikhail Bahktin, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Achille Mbembe. Using Bahktin's assertion that the novel is "necessarily incomplete," I examine how the authors' uses of irony and framing seeks but ultimately fails to achieve a complete, enduring representation of selves. By analyzing how this failure leads to the application of sovereign power – even its violent extreme, "necropower" – I argue that the novels revise the unified, teleological narrative structures of Bahktin and Benjamin. While not dismissing or attempting to transcend the problems of authorship, sovereignty, and teleological histories, the novels present them as questions which must always be reassessed.

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INTRODUCTION:
THE NOVEL AS THE ROMANCE OF SOVEREIGNTY

This study focuses on the ways in which the individual self can be articulated as a discrete and enduring entity in Vladimir Nabokov 1962 novel, *Pale Fire*, and Salman Rushdie's 1981 novel, *Midnight's Children*. Reading the novels in conjunction with narrative theory addressing the novel's generic tendencies, its historical efficacy, and the nature of authorship, as well as political theory addressing power, teleology, and sovereignty, I seek to understand the ways in which the late twentieth century novel is "privileged and cursed," as Rushdie writes of his "midnight's children," to be "both master and victim of [its] times."[1] More plainly, I investigate how Nabokov's and

[1] Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Random House, 2006), 533.

Rushdie's novels and their representations of the self attempt to transcend the historical ruptures that lie, like coiled snakes, at the foundations of their work.

This introduction's title draws from Achille Mbembe, who describes the late-modern conception of sovereignty as "a romance" because it falsely "rests on the belief that the subject is the master and the controlling author of his or her own meaning. Sovereignty is therefore defined as a twofold process of *self-institution* and *self-limitation* (fixing one's own limits for oneself.)"[2] Mbembe's critique of this understanding of sovereignty, like Nabokov's and Rushdie's novels, stems primarily from its historical effects which were encountered head-on in the twentieth century and are not in the least strangers to the twenty-first: namely, the emergence, diverse manifestations, and after-effects of totalitarianism and colonialism. According to Mbembe, this "twofold process" of sovereignty gives rise to what he terms "necropolitics," in which an individual or a collective body, such as a nation, can only ensure its own authority and autonomy by stripping away the authority and autonomy of others, primarily through instruments of death. Within this world of "topographical cruelties," Mbembe continues, the "lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred."[3]

Reading Mbembe in conjunction with Hannah Arendt's conclusion in *On Violence* – that violence itself is not a demonstration of political power but rather a

[2] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 13. (Italics in original)
[3] Mbembe, 40.

substitute, "that every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence"[4] – I want to examine how power and violence manifest themselves in *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children*, as well as how Nabokov and Rushdie respond to these manifestations. By framing my discussion of the novels with Mbembe and Arendt, I want to highlight how they similarly construe novelistic authority and more abstractly, narrative power, as a "twofold process." How is authority created within a novel? In what way can a writer represent time in order to "institute" and "limit" a novel's narrative? And looking to the limits of the novel, what does this say about the power of a narrative enacted through or upon its readers?

With regard to the process of institution, my study will focus on the manner in which both novels rely on a similar use of framing devices and manipulations of time. At the outset of both *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children*, Nabokov and Rushdie present narrator-protagonists who begin with statements of assumed authority. In *Pale Fire*, Charles Kinbote, the questionably-insane deposed King and now-exiled professor, introduces his commentary to John Shade's poem with assertions of his absolute interpretation. He informs the readers, "without my notes Shade's text simply has no human reality at all."[5] Kinbote suggests that readers consult his notes before, during, and after reading the poem, and that the best method of reading is "cutting out and clipping

[4] The passage continues to display the manner in which Arendt incorporates violence conducted by both the government and the governed: "every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence- if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, be they the government or be they the government, have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it." Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970), 87.
[5] Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 28.

together the pages [of the commentary] with the text of the thing."[6] Placed under the command of Kinbote's commentary, Shade's poem ceases to be the tour-de-force of a great American poet, but transforms into a mere "thing." Furthermore, Kinbote's invitation to enact textual violence, to cut and to clip, occurs through unjustified assertions of authorial control. The reader has no reason to listen to Kinbote, this unknown Russian scholar. He has yet to demonstrate why or how he has come to be the unlikely commentator, or why or how his notes can supply meaning to this "dead, lifeless" poem.

The preliminary authorial assertions in *Midnight's Children* do not contain such bold directives to readers, but function through similar assumptions and unjustified testimonies. Saleem Sinai, the narrator-protagonist, begins the novel by telling the readers its meaning, by asserting a primary interpretive process. Saleem was born on the stroke of midnight at the moment of India's independence from Britain: "mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country."[7] Saleem again and again tells the reader to interpret his individual life as a national allegory;[8] that to find the meaning which he is constructing, "you'll have to swallow the world."[9]

Rushdie's and Nabokov's outright proclamations of interpretive frames stand apart from the manner in which readers of novels typically conceive of the literary form.

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[6] Nabokov, 28.
[7] Rushdie, 3.
[8] Rushdie's novel appears before the publication of Frederic Jameson's infamous statement, "all third world texts are necessarily national allegories" and Aziz Ahmad's response. However, many interesting comparisons can be drawn here. Looking at the novel in this light, which is beyond the scope of this study, could lead to a reading of *Midnight's Children* as an anticipatory auto-ethnography.
[9] Rushdie, 4.

In novels, the writer usually does not (often told "should not") assert a text's meaning at the very beginning, but demonstrates and reveals it through the course of the narrative.[10] Mikhail Bahktin expresses this through his distinction between authorial and internally-persuasive discourse. Readers encounter authoritative discourse "with its authority already fused to it[11]... It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance."[12] In contrast, internally persuasive discourse "is affirmed through assimilation. The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite*, it is *open*, in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal even newer *ways to mean*."[13] Kinbote's preliminary commands to read the poem in a certain way or to cut it into a certain shape, as well as Saleem's early assertions of his national importance, stand as prime examples of authoritative discourse. Nabokov and Rushdie present a singular meaning and demand our allegiance. At the outset of *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children*, the reader has no reason to accept these statements as truth, yet there aren't statements to judge them against. Authority here is "instituted" and "limited" only insofar as there is nothing external to it. However, upon arriving at their novels' conclusion, neither Nabokov nor Rushdie "institute" or "limit" their narrator's original

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[10] As such, "Show, don't tell" has become the golden rule of many introductory Creative Writing courses.

[11] Bahktin continues this temporal understanding of authorial discourse, arguing, "it is a *prior* discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal. It is given... It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers." [11] M.M. Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 342.

[12] Bahktin, 343.

[13] Bahktin, 345-6.

authoritative discourse. Instead, both conclusions move towards the opposite – towards disproving and dismantling the narrator's control.

Nabokov's and Rushdie's manipulations of generic conventions – centering on their manipulations of authorial discourse – are another interest of this project. Drawing inspiration from Lukács' statement, "The novel is the epic of the world abandoned by God,"[14] this study seeks to explore how the novel functions as a historical, literary genre and how questions of authorial control reflect and are determined by questions of political sovereignty. Can we view the historical shift in understandings of authority and sovereignty as that which distinguishes the novel from past literary genres, such as the romance or epic? Considering Lukács' statement alongside Carl Schmitt's idea of political theology – that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of state are secularized theological concepts"[15] – suggests that the narratological, literary consequences of the diverse and wavering applications of political sovereignty in the real world occupy a similar theoretical position as God in the world of the epic. So, in terms of the title of this introduction, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, the novel is the romance in which the sovereign enters into question; or, the novel is the romance in which understanding the role of the sovereign is essential to interpreting the work. On the most basic level, this boils down to the question of why and how a novel can have an unreliable narrator, or even seek unreliability. In regards to Nabokov and Rushdie, how

[14] Gyo□rgy Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel; a Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1971), 88.
[15] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1985), 36.

do their representations of narrative authority speak to the manner in which sovereign power emerged in the twentieth century?

Before asking any more questions, I would like to explain a few of the central terms with which I will engage throughout this study. In terms of sovereignty, I will begin with an understanding of the concept based upon definitions such as Mbembe's. It is a process of definition and limitation, or as Carl Schmitt states, "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."[16] The sovereign demarcates the exterior, and in so doing, gives meaning to the interior. Starting with a definition akin to Schmitt's, Mbembe demonstrates the terrible consequences that occur when it is put into motion. Nabokov and Rushdie's novels also seek to contest and modify this preliminary definition.

Another central term will be novel as well as the related terms "novelistic" and "novelistic zone." I am here invoking Bahktin's account of the novel. Bahktin contends that the novel is the first literary genre that "speculates in what is unknown."[17] Furthermore, the novel remains necessarily incomplete, in a constant state of becoming:

> The temporal model of the world changes radically: it becomes a world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not yet been spoken. For the first time in artistic-ideological consciousness, time and the world become historical: they unfold, albeit at first still unclearly and confusedly, as becoming, as an interrupted movement into a real future, as a unified, all-embracing and unconcluded process.[18]

Bahktin's characterization of the novels' inconclusiveness here works three times over. The novel remains historically "young" compared to other literary genres as it is still in the process of historical formation. It internally resists any concrete formation by refusing

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[16] Schmitt, 5.
[17] Bahktin, 32.
[18] Bahktin, 30.

to develop many standardized features, such as generic first or last words. Finally, the novel tends to center on stories about processes and developments themselves. In other words, the novel and novel theory remain altogether incomplete even today, more than two hundred years after being critically articulated as a literary form. My contention with Bahktin's definition in this study arises from the contradictions that are presented by a form that is both necessarily incomplete but also unified.

This contention brings me to the final term I would like to discuss here: unified history. I use this term to indicate a historical narrative that demonstrates the ability to explain itself without outside intervention: a sovereign narrative, so to speak. Giving a more concrete definition to this term without looking at particular examples is difficult because the scope, content, and possibility of these histories change with each writer I am considering. Not only does the demarcation of what remains "inside" or "outside" depend on each text, as we will see in Chapter One with Rushdie and Nabokov's manipulation of framing devices, but the length of time as well as geographical scope of these unified histories changes as well. In this study, only Bahktin subscribes to a notion of a unified history that is universal, covering all time and space. Both Bahktin and Benjamin invoke unified histories that are teleological, requiring the achievement of a specific ideologically determined future. In their novels, the latter writers with whom I engage, especially Nabokov and Rushdie gradually depart from these ideas. Eternity shortens. The world shrinks. Although the notion of eternity decreases with each writer, ensuring unity still retains its importance. Moreover, the possibility of unified histories presumes

the existence of a singular author or sovereign (whether as individual or collective) that acts as a unifier or for whom this unification occurs.

Chapter One begins with a discussion of novelistic unity in the presence of Rushdie and Nabokov's literary framing devices. Nabokov and Rushdie structure their novels as dialogues between framing narrative moments and the narrative moments located within these frames. In *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children*, the frame works as the location in which the Kinbote and Saleem, the narrator-protagonists, can create unified histories. However, in the preliminary act of dividing this framing subject and framed object, Nabokov and Rushdie simultaneously undermine the achievement of unity. Through the ironic structure of the framing device, Rushdie and Nabokov suggest that the concept of a unified history that represents eternity or "the fullness of time" is a historically contingent and ever changing concept.

Chapter Two seeks to locate Rushdie and Nabokov's conceptions of unified histories within the historical and theoretical contexts of the twentieth century. Beginning with Bahktin's teleological account of the novel in *The Dialogic Imagination*, I examine the manner in which Bahktin describes the movement of history. I argue that he conceives of a universal history that unites the absolute past with the absolute present through his concepts of historical inversion and "pre-class world folklore." My second example, drawing from a selection of Walter Benjamin's essays, demonstrates a shift away from absolute unity. In his effort to imagine a unity in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin dismisses the idea of universality (of spanning the entire globe), as

well as an "accurate" representation of the absolute past "as it really was."[19] The historical positioning of this chapter allows for a deeper analysis of the ways which Nabokov and Rushdie approach the notion of unity and sets up the vocabulary which I will use to analyze the structuring of time in *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children.*

This striving for unity over time as well as the dynamic relationship to sovereignty and authority begin to take center stage in Chapter Three, which discusses the manner in which Nabokov and Rushdie represent the individual self in the novel. Most closely focusing on Kinbote and Saleem's autobiographical narratives, their successes or failures in constructing unified histories determine whether or not they can "institute" or "limit" their understandings of the self, to use Mbembe's terminology. As neither Kinbote or Saleem can represent a temporally continuous self within their framing structures, the two use radically distinct means to compensate. Kinbote verges towards necropower; only through exhibiting control over Shade can he come to know himself. Rushdie looks towards community as a means of assuring the continuity of the individual.

Finally, Chapter Four examines the ironic temporal structure of sovereignty within the novels: why Nabokov and Rushdie spend their entire novels asserting authorial control only to call for its dissolution in the final pages. Finishing the chapter and moving into the conclusion, I say a few words about how the endings of *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children* respond to and manipulate generic tendencies; moreover, how the violent

[19] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.

applications of teleological narratives in the twentieth century demand a reassessment of how a novel should end. And already here is a contradiction: "how a novel *should* end."

Writing before all the terrors of the Second World War were realized, and before all the political complications that followed, Bahktin already indicated the problem of ending in the novel. "The novel has no first word… and the final word is yet to be written." Beginnings and endings are difficult to write, and perhaps this difficulty will only escalate and increase. Rushdie notes explicitly in his novel, asking in the final pages, "…how to end? Happily?....in melancholy?... Or with questions?... Or dreams?" Settling on an answer, he writes, "No, that won't do, I shall have to write the future as I have written the past, to set it down with the absolute certainty of a prophet. But the future cannot be preserved in a jar; one jar must remain empty…"[20] I started this introduction with a discussion of sovereignty because that is where this project seeks to end up. In a pre-emptive act of historical inversion, I placed the end at the beginning, hoping that if nothing else, the structure will ensure the unity of the argument and the narrative I am writing. But already there are problems with this. So, let me begin again, with unconcluded movement, or at least the image of such.

[20] Rushdie, 531-32.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE IRONY OF NOVELISTIC FRAMING

Drawing from Bahktin's characterization of the novel as the first deeply historical literary form in which there is "no first word… the final word has yet been spoken," and time moves "as a unified, all-embracing and unconcluded process," early twentieth-century accounts of the genre share an underlying thesis: the world of the novel, no longer assumed to be harmonious and complete from the start, strives towards unity and conclusiveness.[21] In comparison to its predecessors, such as the epic or the romance, the

[21] Not limited to Bahktin and Lukács, this end to presumption is often placed at the beginning of the novel as genre. Take for example Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*. He attributes the typifying realism of the novel to the movement away from traditional mythological narratives because the novelists no longer "accepted the general premise… that, since Nature is essentially complete and unchanging, its records, whether scriptural, legendary or historical, constitute a definitive repertoire of human experience," 14. Similarly, in his more contemporary study, Michael McKeon attributes the growth of the novel to the "epistemological crisis of secularization" and a general destabilization of categories of knowledge, including social categories as well as philosophical ones. Watt and McKeon's narratives of the novel, however, do not assume a movement towards a unification, whether of knowledge or peoples.

novel has lost a fundamental a priori certainty of a coherent reality. Lukács writes, "The epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life."[22] The entire work must not only be created from a blank slate, but it must also justify itself as a unified whole. But if beginnings can occur anywhere and ends are out of sight, then how can writers and readers ever be certain of a novel's unity?

If enduring unity exists at all in novelistic discourse – even if not "as it really was" but as an act of construction – it must exist within, and perhaps despite, a frame capable of bringing together any number of heterogeneous parts. For Bahktin, the existence of multiple languages and linguistic registers within a single novel necessitates this framing: "Under the condition of the novel every direct word – epic, lyric, strictly dramatic – is to a greater or lesser degree made into an object, the word itself becomes a bounded image, and that quite often appears ridiculous in this framed condition."[23] As such, the novel's constant objectification changes the ways in which people can interact and know the literary world. By creating these objects, novels allow their readers to examine them ironically, without the pretense of seriousness or sanctity. Novels "remove distance" between people and the world, making it close and knowable, refusing to accept anything as absolute. Within this model, the novel as a whole exists as a series of inter-framing objects of language - objects that are *not* the direct language of the author - framed once again by the totality of the author's organizational system. This lack of a single, dominant voice within the novel immediately foregrounds questions of authorship.

[22] Lukács, 60.
[23] Bahktin, 49-50.

For Bahktin, if any of the author's language exists beyond the organizing structure, it is outside of the text itself, outside the novelistic "zone of contact." As such, authority and the possibility for unity exists precisely because the novels are discontinuous and without a priori certainty of harmony or completeness.

While every novel exists as a series of interactions between frames and objects, *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children* both make these processes explicit. In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov's presentation of John Shade's 999-line epic poem framed within Charles Kinbote's introduction and commentary, Nabokov presents the extremities of these novelistic processes of objectification and irony. Nabokov displays two major forms of literary discourse, poetry and criticism, and allows the latter to execute complete control over the former. He strips the poem of all of its ability to produce meaning. Kinbote writes in his foreword:

> Although these notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture.[24]

Kinbote's suggestion of "cutting out and clipping together pages with the text of the thing" demonstrates the complete objectification of Shade's entire mode of poetic discourse. He treats it with irreverence bordering on violence, handling it with a knife as one would an old, unknown cadaver. Trying to justify this propensity towards textual violence and excision, Kinbote tells the reader that only his notes can provide the "reality of its author and his surroundings."[25] Without the commentary, in other words, the poem

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[24] Nabokov, 28.
[25] Nabokov, 28.

expresses no unity, or has no ability to communicate any complete, demonstrable meaning. The commentary assumes all ability to produce meaning.

Kinbote's disregard for the poetic unity and conclusiveness of Shade's work stands in stark contrast to the self-contained autonomy of poetic discourse, in which the poet's language is created fully in line with her or his language. Contrasting language in novels and poetry, Bahktin writes:

> The language in a poetic work realizes itself as something about which there can be no doubt, something that cannot be disputed, something all-encompassing. Everything that the poet sees, understand and thinks, he does through the eyes of a given language, in its inner forms, and there is nothing that might require, for its expression, the help of any other or alien language.[26]

In other words, by including the "alien language" of Kinbote's commentary, Nabokov simultaneously alienates the language of the poem from itself. It no longer has the ability to "encompass itself" in this state of dependency. The commentary now encompasses the poem, both literally in terms of syntax and format as well as metaphorically in terms of its semantic power. "Pale Fire" ceases to be its own poem altogether, but rather an image of a poem, a single speech utterance amidst many others, no greater or lesser than a footnote or a parenthetical. From the very start, the reader must approach the supposed unity of the poem – "something about which there can be no doubt" – with an ironic and objectifying eye.

Throughout *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie uses a much more amorphous framing device, but it functions through the same processes of irony and objectification. Instead of the monolithic frame of commentary and poem that dominates *Pale Fire*, Rushdie

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[26] Bahktin, 286.

presents a series of frames that follow a general rhythm and structure. Rushdie presents the reader with two distinct Saleem Sinais. The first is the narrator, the "I"; the second, the protagonist with all his additional names, "Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon."[27] In his pickle factory, aging Saleem recollects, or perhaps constructs, the images of his past selves that compose the bulk of the narrative. Saleem's struggle, much like what we will see in Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," becomes making his life "citable in all its moments;"[28] or, giving purpose and meaning to even the scars, the deformities, and the dismemberments inscribed upon his own history, that of his family, and even the Indian subcontinent. As was the case with Kinbote, achieving this meaning depends upon his ability to make present and retrospectively interpret and make his former selves. In one of his final framing moments, Saleem writes, "Control: I must retain control as long as possible."[29] Saleem's "objects," his chapters and categorizations of past selves, sway to the command of his present self; like Kinbote's commentary, the individual narratives begin to depend on the framing moments in order to derive any meaning.

The framing structures of Nabokov and Rushdie's novels simultaneously work to create and ease the tensions within the texts. Kinbote and Saleem attempt to present a unified history by providing the consistent and all-encompassing voice of the frame. However, the act of framing itself calls this unity into question; the frames highlight the separations and divisions of the text. There are two central divisions which the framing

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[27] Rushdie, 3.
[28] Benjamin, 254.
[29] Rushdie, 531.

structures of the novels emphasize, which I will name here but discuss at greater length in later chapters. First (to be discussed more in Chapter Three,) Kinbote and Saleem use framing devices to construct a unified history of the individual self. Secondly, they use the framing device to construct authority, or to attempt to speak through authorial discourse.

In the framing of selves, Nabokov and Rushdie use their novels' structures both to emphasize and to solve the problems of a model of the self that is based on irony and objectification. John Locke's philosophy of the individual remains a primary historical precedent of this understanding of the self. In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke begins his discussion of the individual self with a "blank slate," or like the novel, without any "generic first words." The Lockean self depends upon the process of creating and synthesizing heterogeneous objects of the mind, whether these objects arise from sensation, memory, or ideas. Through not only creating but retaining the ability to recollect these objects at later moments of time, Locke believes that humans can have a unified sense of the self that overcomes, or rather incorporates, historical changes:

> For as far as any intelligent being can repeat the *idea* of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action; so far it is the same *personal self*. For it is by the consciousness it has of its present thoughts and action, that is a *self to itself* now, and so will be the same self, as far as the same consciousness can extend to action past and to come... the same consciousness uniting those distant actions into the same person, whatever substances contributed to their production.[30]

[30] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 139.

The unity of Locke's self here demands that the present make itself coincide with the past. The "repetition" of the "*self to itself*" extends consciousness into the future. In this act of repetition, the self frames itself as an object of contemplation. The recollection of a particular past moment re-inscribes the moment's' original production. As a whole, Saleem's and Kinbote's autobiographical endeavors can be described as such repetitive objects. Kinbote wants to extend himself back to King Charles; Saleem, back to everyone he has once been.

The persistent temporal movement of the novels poses a new problem for the Lockean self, both within the novels and outside of them. The self repeats itself to itself, but as time moves, it must double the action. In seeking to unify the self, Locke's system requires constant division. Instead of one self growing in munificence, multiple selves become diminished over time. Charles Taylor notes that Locke's insistency on objectification begets fragmentation: "Locke *reifies* the mind to an extraordinary degree. First, he embraces atomism of the mind; our understanding of things is constructed out of the building blocks of simple ideas."[31] Through the process of framing, Kinbote and Saleem similarly "atomize" their representations of the self. As they limit and define these atomic selves through the framing structure, they similarly rely on the framing structure to "build up" a total understanding of the self.

With regards to the unity of the poem "Pale Fire," Kinbote's commentary at once "atomizes" and "alienates" the poem, but it also creates the opportunity to attain a more all-encompassing unity: between poem and commentator, and even poem and reader.

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[31] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1992), 166.

While the commentary removes the poem's primal agency and autonomy, it allows for the possibility of the realization of novelistic unity amidst heterogeneity. Rushdie's use of the frame allows for a Saleem to understand himself as a continuous, historical entity through asserting an underlying unity to the fragmentary narratives of past selves. However, through framing, Rushdie also speaks of Saleem's inevitable disintegration and "falling apart:"

> I am not speaking metaphorically; nor is this the opening gambit of some melodramatic, riddling, grubby appeal for pity. I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug - that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams.[32]

Rushdie structures the novel linearly and chronologically except for anachronistic framing moments such as this. Through these anachronisms, Rushdie poses questions regarding the unity of the self over time that would not be apparent without the division of the narrative through framing. That is to say, even though Saleem undergoes a switched birth, name changes, radical appearance changes, and the like, the frame asserts the continuity of the self. But the frame also becomes the narrative location where the most radical skepticism of unity throughout time and place occurs. We witness Saleem being "buffeted by history," that is to say, struck and moved by its often awful force, but the frame itself does the most damage. It divides up time – "not metaphorically" - but in the most real way that literature allows. It "cracks" and "mutilates" the chronology of the novel until the form itself starts to "come apart at the seams" with Rushdie's often explosive, uncontained prose. We discover multiple Saleems "mysteriously handcuffed to

[32] Rushdie, 36.

history"[33] and also the Saleem that is writing after being supposedly "no longer connected to history."[34] By adding this frame structure, Rushdie creates and enforces these divisions between historical and ahistorical, separation and unity.

What, then, can we make of these narrative frames if they function both as literary stitches as well as the surgical knives? Writing on *The Critique of Judgment*, Derrida attempts to resolve a similar contradiction in Kant by approaching the frame as a parergon. Parergon, in art history, denotes the ornamentation, either as a gilded frame or as columns and drapery, which surrounds the central object of interest in many classical and baroque images and structures.[35] In considering these framing devices, Derrida sees a problem of perspective:

> The *parergon* is distinguished from both the *ergon* (the work) and the milieu; it is distinguished as a figure against a ground. But it is not distinguished in the same way as the work, which is also distinguished from a ground. The parergonal frame is distinguished from two grounds, but in relation to each of these, it disappears into the other. In relation to the work, which may function as its ground, it disappears into the wall and then, by degrees into the general context. In relation to the general context, it disappears into the work. Always a form on a ground, the *parergon* is nevertheless a form which has traditionally been determined not by distinguishing itself, but by disappearing, sinking in, obliterating itself, dissolving just as it expends its greatest energy.[36]

In other words, the parergonal frame exists inside the work when viewers look at the outside, but becomes external to the work when viewers focus on the inside. Straddling

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[33] Rushdie, 3.
[34] Rushdie, 508.
[35] Kant is quite clear, however, in his distinction between such ornamentation and mere finery. Ornamentation adds to the beauty of the composition by augmenting and improving form while finery detracts from the beauty. Finery only works to create charm, not beauty. The distinction comes when the framing "is not incidental" in relation to what it is framing, "but connected to and cooperates in its operation from the outside." Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," *October* 9 (1979), 20.
[36] Derrida, 25-6.

the inside/outside divide, the frame can blend into either. However, instead of treating this as a vague concept, Derrida uses it as the hinge of understanding Kant's *Critique*, and more particularly, understanding the possibility of moving from the individual to the universal. Presenting infinity finitely, as it were, demands the use of a frame. Because locating a frame demands the decision of the exception, of the internal and external elements of the work, Derrida argues that art can never serve aesthetic purposes alone because it is always framed by an interested observer within the "economics of communication."[37] In other words, the inside/outside status of the frame throughout the *Critique* indicates the inability to remove the judgment of beauty entirely from our communicative interests or concepts. Within the consideration of the frame, pure judgment fails and entire system is undermined. The frame reveals both the gap and the edge of the theory, but perhaps also creates a bridge.

Applying the concept of the parergon to Nabokov and Rushdie's framing devices requires a consideration of the distinction between the visual arts, which Kant and Derrida are discussing, and the literary arts, specifically the novel. Referring to Lessing's distinction between visual and the literary representations of beauty, an understanding of the frame within the novel similarly depends upon time because of literature's necessary temporal dependence.[38] The frame functions through and changes with time. In *Pale*

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[37] Craig Owens, "Detachment from the 'Parergon,'" October, 9 (1979), 48.

[38] In *Laocoön*, Lessing first articulates that literature's semantic power relies on the writer's portrayal of time. By arguing that Helen's beauty in *The Illiad* cannot be represented through descriptions of physical characteristics, but rather the years of warfare that are carried out in her name, Lessing suggests that literature is temporally dependent. In making a similar distinction between literary framing and the visual framing that Derrida most often discusses in "The Parergon," the temporal basis of literature again comes to the forefront. That is, the frame cannot

Fire, the foreword and commentary initially frame the "internal unity" of John Shade's poem, but quickly the commentary itself becomes framed by Kinbote's own commentary on the method and location of his writing. Even on the first page, we get word of the "very loud amusement park right in front of [Kinbote's] present lodgings" and this commentary continues sporadically throughout the novel.[39] As the reader learns more about Kinbote's situation – a second exile into unknown American landscapes - questions of unreliability, monomania, and possible insanity frame his act of writing. Moving further along into the text, the number of frames grows, or rather, the image begins to contain its own frames, like a modern city built amidst its ancient ruins. The presentation of each new frame devours the frame before it, covering and hiding the past, but also structuring itself around it.

With Rushdie's constant return to formal frames in every chapter of *Midnight's Children*, the novel seems composed almost entirely of such ruins. Each direct address we receive from Saleem-the-narrator transforms the preceding Saleems - both the narrator and narrated - into an object of the past. Rushdie's framing even seeks to incorporate and account for readers' incredulity and disbelief. Where Nabokov leaves the reader in doubt of Kinbote's reliability, Rushdie uses his frames to constantly quell his readers' doubts. This culminates in explicit recognitions of internal confusions: "I'm tearing myself apart, can't even agree with myself…" and later, "To tell the truth, I lied

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be thought of as a static object, but as that which achieves and changes meaning through the progression of time.

[39] Nabokov, 13.

about Shiva's death. My first out-and-out lie."[40] This testimony to his historical inaccuracies indicates not only the fragility of the narrative objects that are being framed, but also the fragility of the frame itself. If it cracks and crumbles, unable to hold together that which it is framing, what is the use or value? As the frame is always relational to the objects it frames, the destruction of these objects undermines the frame's own validity. It does not "disappear, sink in, obliterate itself," or "dissolve just as it expends its greatest energy," as Derrida's parergonal frame does. Throughout the novels, Nabokov and Rushdie's frames never disappear or dissolve through their own effort. In a constant process of incorporation, new frames envelop their predecessors. In framing Kinbote's commentary with the meta-commentary of his present surroundings, or in framing Saleem's assertions with commentary about these assertions, Nabokov and Rushdie both construct novels that constantly question their own definitiveness, even their own integrity. They question both the limit of framing (the number of frames possible) and eventually the validity of the framing process itself. If locating the place where the parergon and -ergon converge is essential in moving from the individual to the universal, then the constant return to framing displays the fluidity and transitory nature of unity in the novels. The literary frame binds any realization of unity to the movement of time and history. Unity always appears as conditioned by the moment in which the writer or reader tries to conceive of it.

The insistency on questioning the relationship between the frame and the framed highlights Rushdie and Nabokov's retrospective irony. In retrospective irony,

[40] Rushdie, 485,510.

understandings of truth and untruth are bound explicitly to the movement of time. Irony, as Bahktin points out, lies at the heart of any novelistic representation of the world. In the folkloric basis of the novelistic chronotope (I will define and explore these terms further in the next chapter,) Bahktin argues that writers present the world through "the common people's culture of laughter."[41] The novel's irony expresses this laughter by refusing hierarchies and by resisting the elevation of any one idea as absolute truth: "Laughter destroyed epic distance; it began to investigate man freely and familiarly, to turn him inside out, expose the disparity between his surface and his center, between his potential and his reality."[42] In *Midnight's Children* and *Pale Fire*, the disparity between "surface and center" appears as a temporal rather than a spatial distinction. Objects in the novel aren't understood ironically at the moment they occur; they are understood ironically *only later*. For both the reader and the characters, irony does not belong to the novels' framed moments "as they really are," or in the moment of their appearance, but as a process of revision and reinterpretation, as necessarily retrospective. By constantly expanding the scope of their framing, Nabokov and Rushdie urge the reader to re-examine the previous moments of the text.

In this way, the irony of framing becomes that of reflection and return, both for the fictional narrators, engaged in the retrospective process of autobiography, but also for the reader, engaged in the effort to find the "true image of the past." The next chapters will directly engage these abstract notions of Nabokov and Rushdie's irony with specific

[41] Bahktin discusses this most fully in "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" as well as later sections of "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel."
[42] Bahktin, 35.

moments in the text by looking specifically to the temporal disparities that arise through their processes of framing. Analyzing the novels in conjunction with Bahktin's and Benjamin's conceptions of historical narration, two major questions arise: Where, if it all, do these writers see the possibility of the frame dissolving itself? The possibility of unity arising from heterogeneous parts? Secondly, how do these conceptions change with history? What changes from Bahktin to Rushdie's understandings of time's "fullness" and unified histories?

CHAPTER TWO:
HISTORICAL INVERSION & THE IMAGE OF REDEMPTION

The specifically temporal focus of literary framing appears most clearly in Rushdie and Nabokov's use of the frame as a device to unite the past and the present. Throughout their novels, the frame seeks to assert a meaning over the past, to redefine and control it. In the novels, the frame becomes a tool of historical inversion. Bahktin outlines this theory as the early novel's tendency to temporally transplant values and ideals:

> The essence of this inversion is found in the fact that mythological and artistic thinking locates such categories as purpose, ideal, justice, perfection, the harmonious condition of man and society and the like in the *past*. Myths about paradise, a Golden Age, a heroic age, an ancient truth, as well as the later concepts of a "state of nature," of natural, innate rights and so on, are all expressions of this historical inversion. To put it in somewhat simplified terms, we might say that a thing that could and in fact must only be realized exclusively in the *future* is here portrayed as something out of the past, a thing that is in no

> sense part of the past's reality, but a thing that is in its essence a purpose, an obligation.[43]

In *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children*, the narrative frames (as present moment of writing) are often dedicated to re-accessing a past ideal in form as well as content. With the form of his framing commentary, Kinbote attempts to end Shade's near-symmetrical 999-line poem with a recitation of the first line: a formal declaration of harmony and unity through return. He ends his commentary looking both to the past and future; that is, to the inevitability of the future variation of a past theme, the appearance of "a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus."[44] A third time, Nabokov places the beginning at the end. In the oft-forgot pages of the Index, we find the last entry reading "*Zembla*: a distant northern land," urging us to look towards a lost world, but also a kingdom which Kinbote fervently desires to recover, "History permitting."[45] And so much the same, Saleem Sinai sees at the conclusion of his narrative, "that I shall never reach Kashmir," the state in which his narrative began with his grandfather "attempting to pray" in 1915.[46] Nevertheless, the impulse persists: "I shall die with Kashmir on my lips, unable to see the valley of delight to which men go to enjoy life, or to end it, or both."[47] The narrative frame becomes the location of historical inversion in the two novels, and as such, the primary tool for manipulating time into a unified, coherent movement.

Bahktin's identification of historical inversion as the early novel's guiding temporal structure stands at odds with his declarations of the novel's absolute dynamism

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[43] Bahktin, 147.
[44] Bahktin, 301.
[45] Nabokov, 315,301.
[46] Rushdie, 523-4.
[47] Rushdie, 533-3.

as "the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted."[48] Historical inversion, far from seeking change and growth, attempts to return to the mythical genesis of a narrative. Introducing the concept, he disparages it first as "a problem," as "the feeble first efforts at *new* forms for expressing time's fullness," as "peculiar," and as leading to a representation of time which "is denied a basic concreteness... somehow empty and fragmented."[49] In other words, he characterizes historical inversion as a literary device which has been largely sublimated in literary history, and will soon no longer be apparent at all. As he moves from talking about ancient, pre-novelistic forms (such as the biographies, autobiographies, dialogues, and serio-comic narratives) to Rabelais and early articulations of what we firmly label as novels, Bahktin affords increasingly less attention to historical inversion. However, he does not address his own theory's dependency on this process of inversion.

As he reveals the teleological impulses of his historical materialist narrative of the novel, Bahktin blurs together the absolute past and the future. Throughout *The Dialogic Imagination,* he places "pre-class world folklore" as both the origin and the end of the novel and it becomes the necessary foundation of his historical materialism. Drawing from folklore, the novel arises through the ironic capabilities of "the common people's culture of laughter." The novel, like folklore, presents life as "contemporaneity, flowing and transitory, 'low,' [and] present," as opposed to the lofty distance of "high" cultural production such as the Greek epic or tragedy.[50] He argues that the novel seeks an ever-

[48] Bahktin, 3.
[49] Bahktin, 146-7.
[50] Bahktin, 20.

more complete return to the themes and tendencies of folklore (though an absolute or literal return remains impossible.) Bahktin never provides any examples of "pre-class world folklore." It exists only in oral traditions, outside of historical records. As such, he locates its shadow in later literary forms. Wherever "time is *unified* in an unmediated way,"[51] wherever everything exists "exclusively as a part of the collective process of labor and the battle against nature," Bahktin sees a latent manifestation of folklore.[52] Without any textual examples, however, Bahktin's insistence on folklore transforms it into an ideal, "a thing that is in no sense of the past's reality, but... a purpose, and obligation." Despite Bahktin's efforts to dismiss or sublimate historical inversion, ultimately it alone allows him to assert a unified, teleological materialist history.[53] His vision of the novel as that which is capable of uniting the bifurcations of past and present relies on an inversion in order to even be coherent.

Bahktin's account of the novel is useful in analyzing Nabokov and Rushdie's novels because it not only highlights generic impulses, but his own theory's relationship

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[51] Although Bahktin also points out that such unity only appears in comparison to later, divided concepts of time in literature. The unified ideal of historical inversion is by nature reflective. Lukács makes a similar observation in light of his idealization of Greek literary forms, which he names as the provisions of novelistic ideals: "the Greeks' answers came before their questions." 32. Later, he states, "any resurrection of the Greek world is a more or less conscious hypostasy of aesthetics into metaphysics," 38. Lukács and Bahktin's narratives of the novel both feature ambivalence towards the past. On one hand, they condemn the past and reject its ideals as viable within the present day, but on the other hand, they use the past as the crux for their entire accounts of the novel.

[52] Bahktin, 209.

[53] This arises mostly from the fact that in striving for strict materialism, Bahktin, like theorists before him and after, cannot raise his teleological goal, such as the end of the class struggle, as a real possibility of the future unless it belongs to past. A pre-class world is required for narrating a post-class world both because it demonstrates both the historical, non-idealistic basis for change and that class bifurcation has a beginning so it can have an ending (that class itself isn't a historical necessity.) I will explore this complicated relationship between idealism and materialism a little further through the work of Carl Schmitt.

to eternal and "full time." Though historical inversion appears in *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children*, it does not appear as dogmatic or absolute, but as capable of being ironized. Nabokov and Rushdie present historical inversion not as monolithic temporal structure, but as one method among many for constructing a unified history. In their preliminary assertions of historical inversion, Nabokov and Rushdie already add another layer of temporal movement. While both name a preliminary desire for a return to the past within the framing moments –Kinbote's Zembla and Saleem's Kashmir – the novels do not work exclusively towards these returns. There is another temporal structure. Beginning with framing moments (in which the narrator exists in the present) and taking a large analeptic leap into the past, the novels fluctuate between the framing present and analepses, each bringing the audience a little closer to the present than the previous analepses. As the novels progress, the analapses become less distant until they converge with the present moment of narration. In this way, both novels work towards bringing the past to the present rather than making the future an attribute of the past. The novels simultaneously relate historical narratives, but also retroactively explain and justify the starting positions of the two narrator-protagonists. In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote's frame commences the narrative with the reader alongside him in "his present lodgings," poem and pen in hand, working on the commentary. As such, his commentary works not only to set out a specific interpretation of the poem, but also to legitimize his authority in the second order. His narrative not only completes the first action "I am writing," but also the second, "I am writing that I am writing." Explaining how he gained access to the poem and why his commentary is not only true, but necessary, becomes Kinbote's central task.

The commentary and the novel end not with a full explanation of the poem, but more accurately, with an explanation of how he comes to exist in his present condition. While the movement of historical inversion requires the linking of the absolute past and future (which Nabokov displays with the ideal of Zembla,) here the task at hand entails the ability to contain a specific history of the past within the present. Only through writing a history that justifies his present life can Kinbote ensure a specific interpretation of the poem.

The dialogue between these two central temporal impulses – historical inversion and making present – takes on a new tone within *Midnight's Children*. While Nabokov "presents" the past as a means for justifying Kinbote's authority, Rushdie surrounds this process with a sigh of relief, even a shout of celebration. Kinbote's accomplishment of making present occurs in the final paragraphs, with a gradual shift in tense towards the future. His "notes and self are petering out." The parergonal moment in which the frame and the framed converge becomes one of resignation and death. After declaring, "My work is finished. My poet is dead," Kinbote tells us, "I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, but I shall try to exist."[54] Kinbote is finished. He can no longer mature or change, only assume disguises. Nothing is left for him other than mere survival. In comparison, the convergence of the frame and its object in *Midnight's Children* occurs with celebration. For example, here we have the moment in which Padma's place in the novel, as Saleem's fiancée and constant audience within the framing structure, begins to be justified and explained:

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[54] Nabokov, 300.

> ... and who, at the end of my road, planted herself in front of me, arms akimbo, hair glistening with perspiration on the forearms? Who, direct as ever, demanded, "You mister: what you want?"
>
> "Me!" Padma is yelling, excited and a little embarrassed by the memory. "Of course, who else? Me me me!"[55]

Instead of resigning to conclusiveness and death, Saleem, Padma, and the rest of the audience experience a celebration of union. Not only in the merging of past and present, frame and framed, but also the union of people. Moving towards a wedding, Saleem and Padma yell in excitement. Instead of the dead end that Kinbote faces at the end of *Pale Fire*, Saleem and Padma embark on a new beginning. The novel ends with indeterminate forward movement.

In the paradoxical articulation of both historical inversion and making present, Rushdie and Nabokov advance two ways of synthesizing a continuous relationship between the past and the present, justifying the narrator's position in the act. As such, they are also contending with two alternative methods of structuring historical narratives. In doing so, they highlight the manner in which representations of "the fullness of time" are bound to history. What allows for, or causes these changes? By observing these changes and shifts in the understanding of "full time" from Bahktin to Benjamin and then to Nabokov and Rushdie, a strange question arises: How long *is* eternity? Moreover, how does it come about?

In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin expresses a desire for a unified narrative of history similar to that of Bahktin. However, he models this unity and speaks of its attainment in different terms than Bahktin. Instead of offering a progressive

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[55] Rushdie, 526.

historical process that slowly works towards unity, Benjamin posits a complete cessation of this progression:

> Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad... In this structure he recognizes a sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.[56]

Here, the present becomes a place where one can unify the past and stabilize the future not through progress or the slow (re)access of an ideal, but through a reconstruction of history. Benjamin casts the past as a discrete monad that is composed of the interpretations of present ideologies and directed towards constructing a new future world. Benjamin's "Messianic cessation of happening" does not require a faith in the eternal persistence of an ideal world such as the world of "pre-class world folklore," but the sudden fabrication and actualization of new era in history. He conceives of the redemption of an ideal era without requiring that this era have had a prior existence. The image of a redeemed past can be fantastic and unrealistic, without accurate or mimetic representation. History can bend every conception of how "truth" was conceived in the past, as long as it writes a "truth" consistent with the present.

Despite their differences, Bahktin and Benjamin express a fundamental similarity. Each posits in varying degrees that a unified narrative of history is both possible and necessary through writing history with a self-assuring ideological meaning. However, the scope of Bahtkin's narrative is much larger than Benjamin's. He conceives of the history

[56] Benjamin, 264-5.

of literature as a part of an all-encompassing teleological process. In "pre-class world folklore," the entire world becomes involved in the movement towards redemption; all peoples from all times are involved, striving towards a singular event. His conception of history with its trans-valuation of unfathomable proportions functions primarily through a faith in the past. Drawing from similar observations in political narratives, Carl Schmitt writes, "it is possible to confront irrefutably a radical materialist philosophy of history with a similarly radically spiritualist philosophy of history."[57] In the case of Bahktin, the attempts to write a strict materialist theory of the progression of literature results in the increasing need for "pre-class world folklore"- its laughter and irony – as an eternal, transcendent element. By constructing a "radical materialism" demanding that even future goals have verifiable and accurate material existence, Bahktin must locate absolute classlessness within an absolute, unknown past. Without any evidence of the existence of this past, something akin to a spiritual faith propels his narrative. His materialism transforms into idealism.

Bahktin's faith relies upon the belief that eternity arises from progress; or, that elements of the eternal can be observed and intensified over time. Benjamin has no such faith in an eternity that is naturally occurring. It needs to be brought forth, ushered in. Furthermore, it never becomes quite as far-reaching as Bahktin's. Benjamin divorces the achievement of redemption from the insistence, even if imaginary in its nature, that the past contains more power than the present. "To articulate the past historically," he writes, "does not mean to recognize 'the way it really was'. It means to seize hold of a memory

[57] Schmitt, 42.

as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[58] Within this moment, Benjamin still conceives of a "Messianic era" as one in which history is unified and the past "is citable in all its moments." However, Benjamin's dismissal of an "accurate" or "truthful" image of the eternal past occurs alongside an effort to minimize the importance of the past altogether.[59] For Benjamin, constructive history primary orients itself towards the future.

In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin often minimizes the past without deleting its importance altogether. Instead, he emphasizes the value of anticipation, writing, "As flowers turn to the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism, the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history," and later, "The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action."[60] In both passages the past is made present through establishing a new conception of a historical past rather than looking to the past itself, or "how the past really was." Benjamin's redemptive history occurs as a process of making fiction and fabrication explode throughout the reality of the world.

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[58] Benjamin, 257.

[59] In a similar effort, Benjamin condemns granting an "'eternal' image of the past." He quotes an unnamed biologist in order to reduce "the paltry fifty millennia of *homo sapiens*" into "something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day… in relation to the history of organic life on earth," 264, 265. This, of course, considers homo sapiens far beyond the advent of history. In Benjamin's model, the past does not lose all importance, but rather the past changes with the present, never controlling it. Contrasted with the constancy of Bahktin's image of the past, Benjamin's representation of time is neither lacking any concreteness. Rather, he argues for a conception of history in which past, present, and future become equally concrete in a singular moment of redemption.

[60] Benjamin, 257, 263.

Just as Nabokov and Rushdie present historical inversion with an ironic eye, they similarly strip the "messianic power" from constructivist models of history. While the analeptic framing structure of the novels seeks to contain an image of the past within the present, to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger," Nabokov and Rushdie diminish the focus on the future. As a result of Kinbote's moment of danger - his exile and loss of power – he must articulate the past in order to create continuity between his two distinct lives. His life, or at least the life of his past on which he seeks to keep his grasp, depends upon it. Saleem faces multiple moments of danger. Not only must he confront discontinuities in his past and his conceptions about the past, but he also spends the novel anticipating a moment of danger. In his "falling apart" and disintegration, Saleem fears all of his life's meaning will be lost. While not rejecting histories that seize upon the past in "a moment of danger" (for that has become the norm within the novels,) the ability to call forth a new, unified, and redemptive era no longer seems possible. At best, the future is fragile. Looking then to Nabokov and Rushdie's attempts to represent continuous selves within the novel, the ability to articulate a unified history or the lack thereof determines and delineates the possibility of both Kinbote and Saleem's redemption.

CHAPTER THREE:
TIME ZONES AND THE "TICK-TOCK:" NARRATING THE TEMPORAL SELF

Knowing selves is a central problem even before *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children* begin. At the outset, both Kinbote and Saleem have already experienced drastic breaks in an empirical understanding of selves. Neither can observe the stability or continuity of their lives over time. Kinbote, once King Charles, was deposed from power and a "victim" of regicide. His identity as a monarch, his position of power and authority, was stricken completely from him. Saleem's situation appears perhaps even more daunting. Born at midnight at the moment of independence, people publically herald him as the beacon of a new democratic India, a symbol of the division of power and authority across millions of selves. He also discovers that he was switched at birth, a changeling, a person biologically distinct from who he always thought he was. Then he forgets this all anyways, suffering amnesia and having to reconstruct his identity beginning with his

birth. Nevertheless, both Kinbote and Saleem set the obtainment of a stable conception of the self as essential tasks. Neither wants to abandon the question of the self altogether, spending the bulk of their narratives trying to construct an image of themselves that can reach back into the past and endure into the future. As such, their narratives become extended acts of self-institution and self-limitation.

In *Pale Fire*, the institution and limitation of selfhood are always in question and in flux. Even much of the scholarship on the novel has often focused on a demarcation of selves, seeking to know for certain the number of characters in the novel as well as their "actual identities." (Whether there is a Gradus, for example, or only a Jack Gray.) Scholars have posited theories that attribute both poem and commentary to Shade, both to Kinbote, both to Kinbote's "true identity," the delusional Russian scholar Botkin, or to two distinct writers in a variety of simple and complex ways. These debates over the identity or identities of the main characters have illustrated the importance and difficulty of knowing continuous selves in the novel – selves that remain consistent with the movement of time - or perhaps, more fitting, the importance or difficulty of representing these selves linguistically or artistically.[61] Without subscribing to any of the aforementioned theories of the "true" identity of characters and of the internal author, I will proceed merely citing the existence of these various studies as a testament to the weight of the problem of framing selves.

[61] Brian Boyd gives a fairly comprehensive overview of these competing theories of internal authorship and identity in his article, "Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire*," primarily in the opening section (173-178).

In his efforts towards self-institution and self-limitation, Kinbote attempts to fit himself within a model of the self that, like that of Locke, depends upon the reification (and as Taylor displays, subsequent fragmentation or "atomization")[62] and recollection of past sensations, memories, and knowledge. However, once the reader learns the facts of his situation, Kinbote's task appears impossible. Instead of creating knowable objects of himself, he projects these objects onto Shade's poem. On the broadest level, Kinbote's commentary functions by breaking apart Shade's language into atoms, removing and examining each word with a surgeon's scalpel. For Kinbote, "Pale Fire" becomes a means to access a lost home, a sacred crown: "We know how firmly, how stupidly I believed that Shade was composing a poem, a kind of *romaunt*, about the King of Zembla… I was sure the poem would contain the wonderful incidents I had described to him, the characters I had made alive for him and all the unique *atmosphere* of my kingdom."[63] Despite the eventual realization of the opposite, Kinbote determines to find and amplify every small reference to Zembla, and even to construct Zembla where it clearly does not exist. Behind the phrase, "frozen stillicide," Kinbote sees "the shadow of regicide in the rhyme."[64] Behind line 130, "I never bounced a ball or swung a bat," Kinbote constructs an eighteen-page long narrative of King Charles's escape from captivity.[65] Such discrepancies point to the poem and commentary's utter lack of cohesive meaning. More importantly, they display the absurdity of Kinbote ever finding a stable image of himself in the work of another. Taking for granted that there are, in fact,

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[62] Taylor, 166.
[63] Nabokov, 296.
[64] Nabokov, 79.
[65] Nabokov, 117-135.

two distinct authors, these discrepancies highlight the incompatibility of Shade and Kinbote's artistic tasks. Both are attempting to create an artistic representation, an object, of their own self. Shade's poem at first appears autobiographical while Kinbote longs for nothing more than it to be biographical, about his struggles as the deposed Zemblan King. Under these conditions, the task of instituting and limiting the self appears doomed to failure. Their artistic tasks are simply at odds.

Drawing from these preliminary conclusions, there seems to be two ways of looking at the novel. Either Nabokov is pointing to the utter absurdity of asserting selfhood, abandoning the endeavor altogether, or he is attempting to articulate a new method of modeling the self. The first conclusion rests upon notions of the novelistic individual that Bahktin and Lukacs propose. Bahktin writes that the hero of the novel must always remain inadequate to his situation: "The individual is either greater than his fate, or less than his condition as a man."[66] In the case of Kinbote, Nabokov mixes both. He is "greater than his fate," a King living in motor homes across the American Northeast. But Kinbote also becomes "less than his condition as a man," appearing self-satisfied and self-absorbed despite never quite being able to communicate what or who this self is. In this inadequate, incomplete selfhood, ironic objectification fragments and bifurcates the individual. Criticizing rationalist models of the self-awareness based on creating and recollecting objects of the mind, such as that of Locke, Paul de Man describes irony regressing infinitely rather than structuring knowledge:

> We speak then of irony originating at the cost of the empirical self, the statement has to be taken seriously enough to be carried to the extreme: absolute irony is a

[66] Bahktin, 37.

> consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. But this reflection is made possible only by the double structure of ironic language: the ironist invents a form of himself that is "mad" but that does not know its own madness; he then proceeds to reflect on his madness thus objectified.[67]

De Man here describes the instability of knowledge, the fluctuation between irony and certainty that lie at the heart of Bahktin's and Lukacs's novelistic conceptions of the individual. Like Locke, De Man here describes a self that exists through creating its own objects: each turn of irony produces a knowable image of the self, a monadic conception of the self up until the moment of ironization. If irony becomes the basis for knowledge, then assertions of individuality arise through a proliferation of these objects of knowledge, emotion, and sensation. Continuity over time then depends upon reflection upon and recollection of these objects, bringing the past forward and making it present once again. As a result, the subject becomes more of a receptacle of objects, a formal location of recollection rather than a forward actor or agent.[68]

De Man's "madness objectified" illustrates Kinbote's problem of knowledge. While the impetus of the problem changes - meaning that De Man describes "madness

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[67] Paul De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality." *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 216.

[68] Marxist philosophy takes this line of thinking the furthest. Speaking of the "fragmentation of the object of production" that "necessarily entails the fragmentations of the subject" in *History and Class Consciousnes*, Lukacs writes, "As labour is progressively rationalized and mechanized his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity become less and less active and more and more *contemplative*. The contemplative stance adopted towards a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e. a perfectly closed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world: it reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space." Within this system, the subject becomes *only* contemplative. De Man's critique doesn't extend the argument that far. Gyo□rgy Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1970), 89.

arising at the cost of the empirical self" and Kinbote and Saleem experience the opposite, a loss of the empirical self giving rise to madness- *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children* seek to fix the infinite regress of irony. In his temporal manipulation of the relationship between poem and commentary, Kinbote attempts to construct the *romaunt* which he desires in order to stop this regression. Using Bahktin's terminology, Kinbote attempts to create a world of "adventure time," a world in which time has inorganically formed an absolute unity akin to the world of the epic. In this world, selves are unified and meaningful from the very start. Time is not a problem because it is hardly present.

While he criticizes Shade's synchronization of characters within the second canto of the poem as "too labored and long" as well as too clichéd, Kinbote himself coordinates the movements of John Shade and Jack Grey into a plot/ counterplot structure throughout the commentary.[69] As he tries to form his narrative into a sort of medieval romance – in which the meeting of Shade and Grey becomes the central, fated event – Kinbote reduces their actions to "enforced movement through space." He creates a world of simultaneity without any possibility of duration, of real maturation or change:

> On July 5th, at noontime, in the other hemisphere, on the rain-swept tarmac of the Onhava airfield, Gradus, holding a French passport, walked towards a Russian commercial plane bound for Copenhagen, and this event synchronized with Shade's starting in the early morning (Atlantic seaboard time) to compose, or to set down after composing in bed, the opening lines of Canto Two.[70]

The simultaneity of Kinbote's abstract chronotope here asserts a faith in a harmonious movement of the universe. Nothing occurs without reason or justification, as everything leads to the completion of one event. It appears "rounded from within," to use Lukács'

[69] Nabokov, 196.
[70] Nabokov, 157.

terminology, but in an inorganic and sinister way. Every moment appears planned and necessary, "citable" in the course of history. Kinbote's narrative begins to hinge on the phrases of simultaneity in time across space – "Meantime," "at the very minute," etc. – until time and space become one when "two silent time zones had merged to form the standard time of one man's fate."[71] Kinbote's construction of the narrative appears almost anti-novelistic in its treatment of selves in time, advocating a return to a more sure redemption (a confirmable achievement of meaning) than Bahktin and Lukacs's endings of free-flowing contemporaenity and inconclusive duration.

If any faith in redemption exists in Kinbote's narrative, it is only retrospective. That is to say, Nabokov uses death to end the infinite regression of irony. Kinbote writes his entire commentary from a conclusive perspective of death, or with the fore-knowledge of Shade's imminent doom. His death becomes that which exists beyond irony, as an end itself. Of course, death can only give a single meaning to life after life is over. Reflecting upon preterism and the "cold nest" of lost intimate spaces, Shade half-erases the line, "The evening is the time to praise the day."[72] Within this perspective from death, the self and the reader are barred from experiencing the duration which Kinbote not only portrays as possible, but ideal. Nabokov leaves this experience of selves in time exclusively for Kinbote's private relationship with Shade: "The calendar says I had known him only for a few months but there exist friendships which develop their own inner duration, their own eons of transparent time, independent of rotating, malicious

[71] Nabokov, 272.
[72] Nabokov, 107.

music."[73] If the friendship of Kinbote and Shade remains the sole escape-route from the vulgar time of surgical synchronization, Nabokov restricts its entrance. Because Nabokov provides many opportunities for the reader to doubt their friendship entirely, such Sybil's apparent disdain for Kinbote and Shade's not-infrequent cold shoulder, this "inner duration" or these "eons of transparent time" never becomes manifest or confirmable for the readers.

Instead of making the world knowable, "low," and "contemporaneous," the ironic gaze of the commentary-poem relationship works towards doubt and disjunction. That is, here it works to make the world unknowable. Kinbote's objectification of the poem brings about more questions of his own authority rather than ensuring knowledge. Instead of removing "epic distance," he places the world within epic time. As everything in this world becomes finished, death remains the only location of knowable meaning. In "The Storyteller," Benjamin asserts, "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back… Death appears in it with the same regularity as the Reaper does in the processions that pass around the cathedral clock at noon."[74] Benjamin, criticizing the novel (and praising the story) as a continuation of fragmented, bourgeois individualism, locates this tendency in the novel's aversion towards death as well as the general movement of the workings and occurrences of death out of sight and outside domestic life (into nursing homes, hospices, sanatoriums, etc.) Looking at this statement in relationship to *Pale Fire*, what is Kinbote's relationship to death? Nabokov,

[73] Nabokov, 189.
[74] Benjamin, 94-5.

like Benjamin, highlights death's power in narrative. He not only embraces death as the source of authority over meaning, but takes it a step further. He gives meaning to lives that are only known after death has occured. Asserting his meaning, the story of his life can occur *only* with Shade's death. Kinbote's culmination - "My work is finished. My poet is dead" - appears just as intentional and murderous as it does happenstance. In other words, Kinbote gains authority not through "borrowing it from death," but actively bringing death forward.

The assertion of authority that comes from the narrative justification, from the process of making history explain the present, here only functions through silencing another author. Kinbote's self can only exist throughout the text because of violence. Shade's authority is stricken from him; his poem cut apart, dissected, dismantled. Even in his name, we see evidence of his negation. He becomes nothing more than his own shadow, an absence of light. Through Kinbote, Nabokov performs the madness of the objectifying, ironic self when empirical continuity ceases. His attempts to recollect "atoms", or objects of memory, result in a much more sinister objectification. Historical inversion has failed. Zembla remains forever distant and foreign, to Kinbote as well as to the readers. Similarly, a constructivist history in the mode of Benjamin, one in which the past is seized by the present in a moment of danger, has perhaps not failed, but it has revealed unfortunate, if not disastrous consequences. Kinbote's attempt to construct a coherent, unified history (and which is "as it really was") creates a monad, enclosed from within. But there is no "strait gate through which the Messiah may enter." If one thing becomes certain at the end, it is that redemption isn't on its way.

Rushdie also demonstrates that a storyteller must borrow their authority from death, but a manner quite distinct from Nabokov's version. Instead of constructing the narrative from the perspective of a death that has already occurred, Rushdie emphasizes the internal perspective of the writer in the process of dying: "My own hand, I confess, has begun to wobble; not entirely because of its theme., but because I have noticed a thin crack, like a hair, appearing in my wrist, beneath the skin… No matter. We all owe death a life."[75] Death here remains ever-present, but no longer as something that has already occurred, but something which we are anticipating. No longer after the fact, but before it. Nevertheless, Saleem's attempts to assure his authority from death and from the knowledge that death brings a final word. At the very least, Saleem assures the semblance of authority through a sense of urgency. Soon, he will die and meaning will be lost. Assuming this new relationship to death also reconfigures the questions and problems of the unity of the self over time, as that which is conditioned by history.

Throughout the novel, Rushdie writes the fragmentation of the self as a specific historical problem. The first character study we encounter, the portrait of Saleem's grandfather, Aadam Aziz, already expresses these problems closely linked to historical events. Having traveled to Germany to study medicine, Aadam realizes he has begun to see his home through "traveled eyes" as he commences salah, his daily prayer:

> …so here he was, despite their presence in his head, attempting to reunite himself with an earlier self which ignored their influences but knew everything it ought to have known, about submission for example, about what he was doing now, as his hands, guided by old memories, fluttered upwards, thumbs pressed to ears, fingers spread, as he sank to his knees.[76]

[75] Rushdie, 35.
[76] Rushdie, 5-6.

Where his body persists uninterrupted, his mind halts suddenly. From the very onset, historical inversion as a method for ensuring continuity has failed. While Kinbote spends nearly his entire commentary seeking to find Zembla, Rushdie dismisses such an endeavor in the opening pages. Aadam Aziz cannot "reunite himself with an earlier self," nor submit himself to the religion of his ancestors. The possibility of a return has been cut off by the processes of history. Rushdie does not limit these to the unexpected ruptures of the empirical self that occur with abrupt political shifts, the effects of war, or a colonial influence, but here also names actions that seem voluntary in comparison: traveling, education, and social mobility. Juxtaposed with this cessation of unity, Rushdie presents the ageless boatman Tai as a being from an absolute past, as one with nature, outside the "belief in the inevitability of change… a quirky, enduring familiar spirit of the valley." However, Rushdie quickly looks upon Tai with an ironic gaze as well. He is "a watery Caliban, rather too fond of Kashmiri brandy."[77] He cannot be known without some reference to a colonial language, an alien tongue, or like Aadam, with "their presence in his head." In other words, the alien languages of irony restrict a movement towards historical inversion; they bring about an almost irreconcilable change.

Rushdie's quick denunciation of historical inversion as a guiding temporal structure occurs alongside his attempt to write a narrative that doesn't seek the past in the future, but seeks to bring the past forward into the present. While re-accessing an ideal past is impossible from the start, Rushdie's narrative strives to assign the past meaning. That is to say, while Saleem remains desperately concerned with the present throughout

[77] Rushdie, 10.

the novel, it is only insofar as the present relates to the past. If we are to take his proclamations of his own death and dissipation seriously, he spends his final days only trying to give meaning to the past. His hand, like his entire body is no cracking, but soon he fill disintegrate totally; his concern with the present only becomes important because it will end.

Looking at Saleem's narrative as a constructivist history, his actions in his final days become more understandable. Benjamin bases constructivist historiogrpahy on "seiz[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." Articulating the past within these moments of danger allows for the possibility of rewriting history in its entirety. For Benjamin, this act of "seizing hold" requires unwavering effort: "only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."[78] In *Midnight's Children*, the state of exception that allows for a new articulation of history does not arise through the hyper-awareness or activity that Benjamin emphasizes. Instead, it begins passively, when Saleem's only action is seeking his own death, when his family and friends are being killed by bombings in the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war:

> ...now as I look up there is a feeling at the back of my head and after that there is only a tiny but infinite moment of utter clarity while I tumble forward before my parents' funeral pyre, a miniscule but endless instant of knowing, before I am stripped of past present memory time shame and love, a fleeting but also timeless explosion in which I bow my head yes I acquiesce yes in the necessity of the blow, and then I am empty and free, because all the Saleems go pouring out of me, from the baby who appeared in jumbo-sized front-page baby snaps to the eighteen-year-old with his filthy dirty love, pouring out of me, pouring out goes shame and guilt and wanting-to-please and needing-to-be-loved and determined-

[78] Benjamin, 257.

> to-find-a-historical-role and growing-too-fast, I am free of Snotnose and Stainface and Baldy and Sniffer and Mapface...[79]

Within this "tiny but infinite" moment of this seemingly endless sentence (two pages long), Rushdie describes a cessation in Saleem's recollective selfhood. No longer bound to the images of his past, Saleem becomes free from the confines of a contemplative self. This moment, appearing here at the end of Book Two, however, occurs before the first word of the novel if one were to attempt a chronological ordering. Saleem's reconstruction of his identity and history occurs after and because of this death of the self. Here, in a loss of his determined identities - the baby tied to the nation's fate, the boy with a nose too big, who is already losing his hair and who is becoming too old too fast - a break in the continuum of history occurs. Saleem is then "free" to reconstruct his life, including his past, from this moment onward.

Rushdie's characterization of Saleem's relationship to history here does not fit within the sheer subjectivity of Benjamin's constructivist mission. Rushdie describes Saleem as the liberated rather than the liberator. Paradoxically, the violence of aerial warfare unchains him from the necessities of constricting historical roles. History that occurs far above his head here also sets him free. Saleem notes this later, writing, "There are ironies here... There is nothing like a War for the reinvention of lives."[80] This irony extends further. Saleem is liberated from the necessities of his past as he "acquiesces yes in the necessity of the blow." And more, concurring with Saleem's "emptying and freeing," India and Pakistan reach a cease fire. The war ends "because both sides had run

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[79] Rushdie, 392.
[80] Rushdie, 468.d

out of ammunition, more or less simultaneously."[81] Not through the intent of any of the actors involved, the barrels of the guns are empty as is Saleem. Like Kinbote's enforcement of temporal simultaneity within his narrative through the mergence of "two silent time zones" into "the standard time of one man's fate," Rushdie here organizes Salleem's life into what seems like a world of forced synchronization. Even this liberation from the external world and his public fate occurs in a public event. However, while this organization of time in *Pale Fire* corresponds to Kinbote's effort to create a self in which the subject and object (in his case, the commentary and poem) cohere perfectly, Saleem willingly admits to the discrepancy between his narrating and narrated selves; that past, present, and future never coincide perfectly.

Rushdie writes an asymptotic model of selfhood. In contrast to *Pale Fire*'s synchronization of Shade and Gradus in their dead, finished states, no two people ever coincide in *Midnight's Children*, not even past and present selves. In Saleem's own case, this great temporal chasm that occurs at the conclusion of Book Two creates an impetus for writing the narrative of his life, but even this does not occur immediately. It begins much later, after he spends a calendar year in the Sundarbans for the duration of a few days or weeks; after he runs into Parvati and the buddha remembers that his name was and is again Saleem; after disappearing in a snake-charmers basket to go live with communist magicians; after a marriage and a son; after sterilization and after meeting Padma, who becomes his audience throughout the tale. Despite the immensity of all of these events and their importance to Saleem's present life, they take on the size of

[81] Rushdie, 393.

footnotes - handled in a few chapters, about one hundred pages - in relation to the four-hundred pages of life from which the bombs had set him free. Beginning with the frame, Saleem moves slowly from the past towards his present state through a process of nearing, closing in upon his current self. However, where Kinbote's alignment of frame and framed marks a conclusion, Saleem's reveals the need for more framing: "The process of revision should be constant and endless; don't think I'm satisfied with what I've done."[82] After Saleem covers the past, leading back long before his birth, he arrives at the present only to realize that it remains in constant transition. While past selves can be brought forward, they can never coincide with the self of the present.

Rushdie, like Nabokov, demonstrates the flaws of a model of selfhood based upon the creation and recollection of objects. However, Rushdie's critique arises not from the problems of violent objectification, but of the impossibility of ever being able to distinguish between the framing and the framed. Where Nabokov sees the creation of historical monads to carry alarming prospects, Rushdie sees it as an endless task. Just as there as is no return to the absolute past, no historical inversion, there is no cessation of happening. In his "chutnification of history," Saleem writes, "To pickle is to give immortality after all," but he admits parenthetically that he is "no longer obsessed with purity."[83] Rather, Saleem's constructivist history changes itself as well as the historian in the process of pickling. The flavors can intensify, bitter, sweeten, and combine with "myriad possible effects." In other words, even if one approaches history as a process of creating monads, these monads will begin to ferment with age; not divide or grow, but

[82] Rushdie, 530.
[83] Rushdie, 529.

change. As these invisible affects work on their own to alter historical narratives just as much as the historian, the division between the two becomes increasingly difficult to make.

What are the underlying similarities between the articulation of selves in *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children*? Most fundamentally, both express the need for self-articulation; that is, neither Nabokov or Rushdie are willing to abandon the effort to link past selves with the present and future. Even after his liberation, Saleem writes, "my old life was waiting to reclaim me,"[84] and later:

> Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I," every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.[85]

Saleem argues for the internal contradictions of selfhood, its pliability and vagueness, but never abandons the endeavor for a discrete self. The multitudes are contained within singular "I's." The self expands forward and backward in time as well as across space. In order to do so, Rushdie appeals to that which seems to be absent from *Pale Fire* and what Benjamin locates as the novel's ultimate lack: that is the notion of community. Here, Salleem asserts the continuity of the self without appealing to the process of objectification and recollection. Rather, Rushdie advances a unified self that operates through interaction with others and the constant realization of how past selves have affected others.

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[84] Rushdie, 423.
[85] Rushdie, 441.

Looking back to Nabokov's articulation of selves, one can see the pale beginnings of this re-articulation of self and community. In an essay on *Pale Fire*, Brian Boyd urges readers to look for positive irony that "attempts to encompass… his negative irony, his ability to deflate, to register disappointments, humiliations and horrors."[86] In line with this, Boyd argues that Nabokov's "savage irony" with Gradus and Kinbote at first undercuts the poem's order. However, through Kinbote's completion of line 999 with a return to the first line, Nabokov creates "a sustained explosion of positive ironies that suggests an afterlife might transform what looks like maximum meaninglessness into a synthesis of radiant sense."[87] Boyd's observation deepens the problem of temporal understanding of the self in *Pale Fire*. He re-inscribes the notion that knowledge of the self can only be deferred, that it must be finished in order to be coherent. Rather, death dictates meaning. However, buried within this statement, Boyd also suggests that it is not afterlife or deferral, but community that can make selves knowable and meaningful. While Boyd argues that this community makes selves knowable within the text of the novel, I don't think this is the case. Nabokov's irony does not function quite as positively as Boyd would like: The reader has little reason to trust Kinbote or assume that Shade's poem wants or needs to be symmetrical. Nevertheless, Nabokov's positive irony highlights a collaborative community as the primary lack leading to Kinbote's

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[86] Boyd's distinction of positive and negative irony is synonymous, I think, with Wayne Booth's notion stable and unstable irony, which he articulates in *Rhetoric of Irony*. As such, I take positive, stable irony to indicate that which undermines knowledge but points to a different, solid foundation. Negative, unstable irony, on the other hand, undermines knowledge without pointing to any solid foundation, indicating a general flaw in epistemological systems. Brian Boyd, "Shade and Shape in *Pale Fire*" *Nabokov Studies* 4, no. 1 (1997): 221.

[87] Boyd, 220.

monomaniacal narration. Kinbote cannot know unity without the assistance of Shade's poem, and he cannot know unity in his impossible artistic task of mapping Zembla onto "Pale Fire," but Nabokov's emphasis on this failure begins to point to the manner in which selves must collaborate in order to become coherent.

Nabokov's insistence on negation throughout *Pale Fire* demonstrates Kinbote's need for community greater than any postmortem illusions of unity. In the title passage, Kinbote relates that Shade ensured the authorship of his poem through destroying drafts "the moment he ceased to need them... in the pale fire of the incinerator."[88] As he uses negation as a means to assert internal authority, Nabokov uses lacks to direct the novel externally. Not only do the lacks work towards forming meaning in the novel, but they are that which allow *Pale Fire* to even be categorized as a novel. As Kinbote's narration, rather than working towards novelization itself, seeks to create a finished totality more akin to an epic or *romaunt*, what makes it novelistic? It is the failure of Kinbote's epic – its lack of coherence – that births a novel. Looking past Shade's negations to the lacks that Kinbote identifies, the self's need for community appears. In his commentary to line 822: "killing a Balkan King," Kinbote writes, "Fervently would I wish to report that the reading in the draft was: "killing a Zemblan king" – but alas, it is not so: the card with the draft has not been preserved by Shade."[89] Kinbote's certain knowledge of the past existence of incinerated note-cards arises from the same drive that compels him to name an "inner duration" of his friendship with Shade (yet unable to add a description,) to add a thousandth-line that coordinates with the first, and to write a commentary at all. In his

[88] Nabokov, 15.
[89] Nabokov, 262.

forced exile, Kinbote desperately attempts to find community, both in his efforts to recall Zembla as well as his efforts to establish a new, enduring relationship with Shade, or Shade's text. Kinbote's negation of Shade paradoxically arises from his fervent desires to attach himself to Shade and create a world of mutual understanding; from his lack of coherence and understanding as an isolated individual.

In both novels, the attempt to construct the self through objectification and recollection fails. Furthermore, whether through a demonstration of its absence or an account of its re-articulation, Nabokov and Rushdie indicate community and collaboration as alternative methods for advancing a continuous and enduring representation of selves. In the final pages of his mammoth re-articulation of history, Rushdie writes, "New myths are needed; but that's none of my business."[90] Tongue-in-cheek, Rushdie offers a new method of understanding the self and community. Raising questions of how selves become known through narrative and more, how they can endure continuously in time, both Rushdie and Nabokov demonstrate the flaws of historical inversion and constructive historiography. With Kinbote's separation from Zembla and Saleem's realization that the Kashmir of his ancestors remains out of reach, returning to an ideal past becomes impossible. More, calling forth a singular monad as an end of history, or a Messianic era, seems both difficult and dangerous as each assertion of a unified history only comes about through silencing another. Looking to community as a means of articulating the self, how is community itself articulated in the novels? How is

[90] Rushdie, 527.

CHAPTER FOUR:
THE DISSOLUTION OF SOVEREIGNTY

A layer of temporal irony stands between the question of sovereignty in the novels and the first-time reader. The questions which the texts beg of readers change from the first words to the last. At the outset of each of the novels, their primary concern relates to the assurance of sovereignty. How is absolute authority achieved and displayed? Kinbote seeks to demonstrate the definitiveness of his commentary. Saleem "must work fast, faster than Scheherazade," if he wants to demonstrate the meaning which he desires and "avoid absurdity."[91] In both instances, the question which the narrators must answer is not only how to institute and limit a meaning, but prove its superiority to any others. As the previous chapter demonstrates, this task depends upon asserting a stable understanding of the individual self over time. However, as the effort to

[91] Rushdie, 3.

know a self that is self-instituted and self-limited fails, readers redress the question of sovereignty. The failure of self-institution and self-limitation undermines the reality of ever becoming sovereign and reposes the reader's initial question yet again. Not only do the causes of the failure of sovereignty come into question, but why Nabokov and Rushdie use their novels to perform this failure? Or why does each author devote hundreds of pages to affirming the concept before ultimately departing from it? My previous chapter addressed, in part, the first of these questions. Sovereignty fails in each novel because the process of self-institution and self-limitation cannot occur in isolation: institution and limitation demands other people. In *Pale Fire*, it demands the performance of violence and the exertion of control over others. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie disperses the power of the sovereign through his call for community. Both novels conclude with a dismissal of the sovereign individual as a possibility for their narrator-protagonists.

In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote can only become sovereign through demonstrating his control over Shade and his text. Shade's death both affirms and destroys Kinbote's sovereignty. Only by proving that Shade was mistakenly killed by Gradus in attempt to kill King Charles of Zembla can Kinbote assert his own regal status. Shade's death ceases to be his own. In his desire for his own importance, Kinbote transforms Shade's death into a death for the king, even a king that is not his own. Once taking the finished poem and leaving Shade's dead body, Kinbote feels instantly reconnected to his lost palace. He secures the poem for himself in a closet, "from which I exited as if it had been the end of the secret passage that had taken me all the way out of my enchanted castle and right

from Zembla to *this* Arcady."[92] In this moment, Kinbote not only imagines a direct link back to Zembla, and thus a proof of his identity and authority, but he also imagines a transformation of his present situation. The United States becomes an Arcady, a pastoral ideal, just as magical and fantastic as the "enchanted castle" that he left. Kinbote ushers forth a new Messianic era through Shade's death, if even only for a brief moment. In his death, Shade becomes a martyr that brings forth this new golden age. In "Necropolitics," Mbembe describes the logic of martyrdom as an attempt to similarly transcend the present. The body of the martyr transforms into a signification of eternity:

> The body in itself has neither power nor value. The power and value of the body result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity. In other words, in death, the future is collapsed into the present… In its desire for eternity, the besieged body passes through two stages. First it is transformed into a mere thing… becomes a piece of metal whose function is, through sacrifice, to bring eternal life into being.[93]

Just as his poem transforms into a "mere thing" in relation to the commentary, Shade's body becomes a "mere thing" in Kinbote's effort to secure the poem and his future. Kinbote affords no respect to Shade in the final pages of the novel, never acknowledging any reverence or respect for the great poet, the man with whom he had supposedly had such a deep friendship. He values Shade's body only insofar as his death can provide him with a better future, even eternal justification of his life.

Kinbote's sovereignty as well as this better future cannot be sustained within the novel, let alone outside of the novel. By relying on Shade's death to prove his own authority and status, Kinbote revokes any future outside his relationship to the poem. The

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[92] Nabokov, 295.
[93] Mbembe, 37.

"future is collapsed into the present" in death. However, once the moment of death passes, so does this future. Upon reading the poem and discovering Shade did not devote the content of it to King Charles or Zembla, Kinbote's enthusiasm quickly leaves him. In the final paragraph, he explicitly admits to an alternative reading of the narrative in the guise of a play he might compose: "an old-fashioned melodrama with three principals: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished old poet who stumbles by chance into the line of fire."[94] In this re-articulation of the narrative, Kinbote has not only lost the ability to call himself a king, if even a former king, but more importantly the ability to control his relationship to the past. In a chronological account of events, this realization occurs before the Kinbote begins writing the commentary. Nevertheless, Nabokov's manipulation of time through the act of framing places this moment at the conclusion. In this final moment, Nabokov adds one last frame to the novel. In an ironic turn, the reader looks back at the novel as one in which authority has been undermined before the first word, yet one in which almost every word up until the last attempts to affirm this authority.

A similar ironic turn concludes *Midnight's Children*. After spending the entire novel seeking to demonstrate his control over the meaning of the novel and the narrative of his life, Saleem concludes that this remains impossible. The key word here is remains. Like *Pale Fire*, Rushdie ends the novel where he commenced it, with the narrator engaged in the process of writing. After devoting more than five hundred pages to instituting and limiting an understanding of his self, of asserting his voice, Saleem

[94] Nabokov, 301.

concludes: "Yes, they will trample me underfoot... reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, in all good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his..."[95] Through the manipulation of framing, Rushdie concludes the novel with a complete dispersion of Saleem's authority even though this conclusion occurs where the novel begins: with Saleem writing in his Bombay pickle factory. Where Saleem's voice ends, Rushdie's voice directs the readers back to the beginning of the novel to reexamine the preliminary uses of authorial discourse. In their conclusions, Nabokov and Rushdie no longer pose the question of how sovereignty can be instituted and limited because sovereignty appears impossible. Instead, they beg a new question: why assert sovereignty, authority, and control throughout the entire novels if their failure could have been stated from the very start?

Nabokov and Rushdie offer multiple answers this question in the novels. First, one could assert that both Kinbote and Saleem gain a new understanding regarding the nature of authorship and control in the process of writing itself. However, both writers make their process explicit and neither text suggests an inability to revise. Saleem even goes as far as to state, "the process of revision should be constant and endless."[96] One could also argue that the novel demands an authorial presence, but as Bahktin pointed out, this presence is in the organizational system. Looking to the organizational structures of the novels, Nabokov and Rushdie present a historical narrative which places sovereignty and non-sovereignty in dialogue. But what is "non-sovereignty" in the novels? Rather, what alternative do the novels offer, or defer to, when sovereignty fails?

[95] Rushdie, 533.
[96] Rushdie, 530.

The absence of sovereignty, or non-sovereignty, indicates one of two things. Either sovereignty disappears through being subjugated to another, more powerful authority – as is the case with Shade – or sovereignty disappears through a dispersion and decentralization of power. According to Schmitt, "the liberal constitutional state" exemplifies the latter, it "repress[es] the question of sovereignty by a division and mutual control of competence."[97] As a result, the law, rather than the state becomes sovereign; the state remains to fulfill its one function of "producing law."[98] Schmitt's critique arises from the concern that the liberal, constitutional state contains no ability to act during exceptional situations that confound the law, situations for which the law does not account. Only the "normal" can be handled effectively: "The highest competence cannot be traceable to a person or to a sociopsychological power complex but only to the sovereign order in the unity of the system of norms."[99] In a temporal framework, the past binds the state. The state can act only according to the "unity of the system of norms." It becomes reflective, unable to bring about change, unable to be a future-oriented agent.

Mapping this problem of sovereignty onto the novels, there are both formal considerations and those regarding content. Formally, the problem of articulating the self within the novels crashes into a similar problem of reflection. Constructing the self upon the unified norms of the past, or even finding this norm in the light of the ever-changing

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[97] Schmitt, 11.

[98] Schmitt argues that although the state is confined solely to the production of laws, it cannot produce the content of laws, rather only reflect the content of the "norm," the "value of interests as it springs from the people's feeling or sense of right." In his assertion that the state is confined to the norm, it here also becomes clear that Schmitt conceives of the state as separate and distinct from its members.

[99] Schmitt, 19.

present not only becomes impossible, but similarly restricts a full consideration of the present as it appears "in a moment of danger," as Benjamin would have it. Taking these considerations in terms of authority, however, where does the comparison lead? Bahktin's conception of the novel demonstrates both the juristic, law-based sovereignty as well as a consideration of the exception, that which remains outside the norm, even the novel itself. While Bahktin argues that the author's voice never appears directly in the novel (but only in the creation of an organized unity), he also contends that novelistic authority arises from disunity, or from the novel's incomplete nature: "The novel devises various forms and methods for employing the surplus knowledge that the author has... it is possible to utilize this authorial surplus in an external way."[100] Leaving plot points or character's presences left unexplained, never uncovering an authoritative "truth" within the novel, etc. creates novelistic authority. In denying information, the novelist implies (or perhaps the reader infers) that completion is possible not here within the text, but elsewhere: outside the novel in the mind of the author. Novelistic authority here straddles the line between decisionist and juristic conceptions of sovereignty.[101] The author both "decides on the exception" and displays power in the creation of a unified organizational system. For Bahktin, the author gains authority in departing from the text, in ending the novel as well as in constructing it.

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[100] Bahktin, 32.

[101] Schmitt defines "decisionist" systems of government as ones that allows for the absolute authority of a singular ruler. The historical precedent he uses to illustrate this is the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Juristic systems function through giving the highest power to a system of laws and trying to repress the activity of a sovereign. Schmitt, 33.

Rushdie's and Nabokov's novels perform the opposite. Each ends with a call for the dispersion of authority; denying Kinbote and Saleem's surplus of knowledge. In part, this occurs because of the narrators' efforts to exhaust their knowledge in order to justify their positions as narrators. Kinbote is "finshed" and the process of Salleem's disintegration concludes: "now that I can, I swear, see the cracks on the backs of my hands, cracks along my hairline and between my toes, why do I not bleed? Am I already so emptied desiccated pickled? Am I already the mummy of myself?"[102] Taken to the furthest extent, our fictional authors have imparted so much of themselves to their texts (or rather, constructed themselves so exclusively as textual entities) that they cease to exist outside of the texts. Kinbote leaves it to God to help him "to rid myself of any desire to follow the example of two other characters in this work" and commit suicide.[103] Saleem has dried himself out, his past is contained in pickle jars and on paper. In the final moment of disintegration, Saleem transforms into particles of language just as much as he falls apart into specks of bodily dust. In the concluding "fission of Saleem," he writes, "I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd... because I have been so many too-many persons, life unlike syntax allows one more than three, and at last somewhere the striking of a clock, twelve chimes, release."[104] Saleem becomes at once a "bag of bones" broken to pieces as well as a syllable of language. He is the "bomb-" in "Bombay," just as he is also "-ay" and he is the "ex-" and the "-plode." In other words, by "instituting" himself within the language of

[102] Rushdie, 531.
[103] Nabokov, 300.
[104] Rushdie, 533.

the novel, he has not only "limited" his authority, but confined himself, placed himself within the small, rectangular box.

The novels' rejection of authorial surplus reflects a rejection of such decisionist models of sovereignty that take the exception as their primary locus. While Schmitt conceives of the exception as the realm of the sovereign, Mbembe casts this in a much more sinister way. To maintain sovereignty, one must create a constant state of exception. Drawing from the work of Agamben, Mbembe describes "death worlds" (concentration camps, colonies, ghettos, etc.) that allow for the constant proliferation of violence: "permanent spatial arrangements that remain continually outside the normal state of law."[105] As I have already demonstrated, Kinbote's handling of the poem resembles the creation of a "death world," but upon the failure of the frame-framed binary that Kinbote at first enforces, Nabokov also undermines any certainty of location of authorial control within the novel. Kinbote's frame at first provides a home base from which the reader can explore the various alternate worlds of the novel. However, the end of the framing occurs with the movement into indeterminate spatial locations of highways and motor homes. Instead of the precise mapping and synchronization of the bulk of the novel – centering around the "meanwhiles" and the "at that very moment" that guide the movement of characters – Kinbote finishes with the possibilities of "another campus," placeless "madhouse," and the location of "wherever the scene is laid… somewhere."[106] Looking at sovereignty as the institution and limitation of specific spaces or territories, Nabokov disables any distinction of place. Instead of living within the clearly discernible borders

[105] Mbembe, 13.
[106] Nabokov, 301.

of his former kingdom, Kinbote can now only live *in between* places. Moreover, returning to the beginning pages of his introduction to the poem, his surroundings impinge upon his act of writing. Amidst his description of his method, Kinbote interjects suddenly, "There is a very loud amusement park right in front of my present lodgings." *Pale Fire* moves not only towards ambiguous and transient geographies, but intrusive ones as well.

The display of sovereignty throughout the novel appears increasingly ambiguous and fleeting. In the political content of the novel, King Charles' is disposed by the socialist, "Karlist" revolutionaries, much to his dismay. He describes his Zembla as "peaceful and elegant":

> Owing to a fluid system of judicious alliances, Mars in his time never marred the record. Internally, until corruption, betrayal, and Extremism penetrated it, the People's Place (parliament) worked in perfect harmony with the Royal Council. Harmony, indeed was the reign's password... the polite arts and pure sciences flourished... the climate seemed to be improving... taxation had become a thing of beauty...The poor were getting little richer, the rich a little poorer (in accordance with what may be known some day as Kinbote's law)... Parachuting had become a popular sport. Everybody, in a word, was content."[107]

Here sovereignty appears as something belonging to the absolute past of historical inversion. The language of Nabokov and Bahktin almost perfectly coincide. Kinbote almost double's Bahktin's description of "harmonious condition of man and society"[108] in his fantasy of a pure past. But Nabokov's irony pervades the passage. Justifying King Charles' reign, Nabokov places Zembla once again into the realm of fantasy. An improving climate and the prevalence of parachutes are attributed to the King's power

[107] Nabokov, 75.
[108] Bahktin, 147.

just as much as the beautiful taxation and "fluid system of judicious alliances." In this idealized and revised historically inverted image, Kinbote's conception of his sovereign reign appears quite distinct from that of Mbembe or Schmitt. Here, sovereignty is marked by stability and peaceful coordination. The only "exception" is the Extremists' intrusion upon the harmony of the country.

Appearing as an image of an unknowable past, Nabokov contrasts this idealized portrait of Zembla and of sovereignty with the novels' ambivalent and ambiguous displays of political power. Even in the Extremists' seizing of power, Nabokov never clearly delineates the divisions of power. They successfully capture and depose the King, but never accomplish their task of killing him, even fail in detaining him. Nevertheless, his attempt to achieve authority in the act of writing always occurs amidst his attempt to avoid the Extremists and allow them to solidify their own authority. As such, assertions of sovereignty and assertions of non-sovereignty cease to appear distinct through the irony of the novel. In the account of his escape from his detainment, Kinbote compares his deposition from power to his attainment of it:

> He experienced a blend of anguish and exultation, a kind of amorous joy, the like of which he had last known on the day of his coronation, when, as he walked to his throne, a few bars of incredibly rich, deep, plenteous music (whose authorship and physical source he was never able to ascertain) struck his ear, and he inhaled the hair oil of the pretty page who had bent to brush a rose petal off the footstool, and by the light of his torch the King now saw that he was hideously garbed in bright red.[109]

Through the juxtaposition and conflation of exile and coronation, Nabokov indicates the impossibility of determining a location of power or distinguishing power from that of

[109] Nabokov, 133.

subjugation. The seat of sovereign power is both "anguish and exultation." Rising to power, the King looks hideous to himself, even more so in comparison to the "pretty page" who prostrates himself at the throne. The King's unspeakable desires – scattered and dissimulated throughout the novel – here emphasize the paradox of his monarchial sovereign power. Even as the monarch, or even more because of it, he must disguise his sexuality. In his coronation, the King remains subject to himself and the attractive page, but also becomes subject to the expectations of the Zemblan people. As King, his sexuality becomes a national issue, forcing him into a heterosexual marriage in order to maintain a monarchial image. The coronation has not given him ultimate power, but rather disperses and divides his power. Like the author behind the "incredibly deep, plenteous" music he hears, the source or seat of sovereign power remains impossible to locate.

Through the indeterminacy of power and subjugation, Nabokov critiques the sovereignty of "instituting" and "limiting" by highlighting its temporal inconsistency. Instead focusing upon the spatial concept in which the sovereign retains power within specific coordinates, or in which the sovereign delineates borders through deciding on what remains inside or outside the law, Nabokov argues that sovereignty is only guaranteed through the display and performance of actions that appear to be sovereign. Arendt's critique functions similarly: "The famous sovereignty of political bodies has always been an illusion, which, moreover, can be maintained only by the instruments of

violence, that is, with essentially nonpolitical means."[110] Mbembe takes Arendt's critique to the extreme, describing the creation of "war machines" and "death worlds" that become the only means for states to perform their sovereignty ad infinitum.[111] As sovereignty can only be achieved in the actions of exclusion and negation, the state must maintain this "illusion" through continuous display. Within *Pale Fire*, Nabokov presents the effort to maintain the illusion of sovereignty most clearly in Kinbote's attempts to prove his Kingship, or to demonstrate his control over Shade's poem, but also in Shade's only authorial moment – the act of burning the text:

> As a rule, Shade always burned drafts the moment he ceased to need them: well do I recall seeing him from my porch, on a brilliant morning, burning a whole stack of them in the pale fire of the incinerator before which he stood with bent head like an official mourner among the wind-borne black butterflies of that backyard auto-da-fé.[112]

The "backyard auto-da-fé" through incineration at once sparks images of the holocaust in its close historical proximity. Amidst all the moments in which Kinbote objectifies and co-opts Shade's poem, the only moment in which Nabokov portrays Shade in control of his own work features Kinbote watching him demonstrate this ritual of destruction. Despite Kinbote's many voyeuristic glances into the Shade's home, several in which he observes John at work on the poem, only here in his act of negation is his authority beyond question. The poem that he institute's and limits through writing transforms into a "mere thing," an object upon which Kinbote and others can project their own interpretations and meanings. Here "in the pale fire of the incinerator," Nabokov

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[110] Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 164.
[111] Mbembe, 30.
[112] Nabokov, 15.

describes the only moment in which Shade has the authority to decide unequivocally on both content and meaning.

In Kinbote's departure from the narrative, his final words, his predictions for the future of "join[ing] forces with Odon in a new motion picture: *Escape from Zembla*," or his plans to "cook up a stage play"[113] of his life works to illustrate that Kinbote's monarchial status can only continue through continued performances. Rushdie similarly presents Saleem's story through allusions to Bombay talkies and radio programs. Trying to incorporate an error in the date of Mahatma Gandhi's death in his narrative, Saleem asks,

> Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything- to re-write the whole history of my time purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others.[114]

While Kinbote unquestioningly and consistently places himself within the central role of his narration, Saleem hesitates to do so, or at the very least, self-reflexively questions his impulse. The confirmation of his role in the narrative depends upon external validation and collaboration with others. Instead of affirming an absolute meaning, he states, "I'll have to leave it to others." Moreover, here Saleem's primary source of doubt stems from the absence of Padma, his audience. "I, Padma-less, send these words into darkness and am afraid of being disbelieved."[115] Rushdie attributes disbelief and uncertainty to solitary meaning, the absence of opposing opinions. If sovereignty remains a performance and the

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[113] Nabokov, 301.
[114] Rushdie, 190.
[115] Rushdie, 190.

act of maintaining an illusion, as it was in *Pale Fire*, then here the audience is just as important as the author or the players.

Rushdie's representation of sovereignty, like his representation of the self, requires the presence of a community. Saleem's ability to judge upon the contents and focus of the history he writes depends upon Padma and others. Even as the author, he cannot here delineate a singular, definitive, self-constructed meaning. Looking again to Arendt, Rushdie constructs Saleem's position here as one of power through collaboration. Arendt's redefinition of power seeks to break from many of its historical precedents that locate the seat of power in an individual and in dominance. She writes, "Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together."[116] This necessarily communal definition of power revises decisionist models of sovereignty like that of Schmitt. Even in her definition of authority, Arendt removes the agency of any one individual. "Authority," she writes, "is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed."[117] Like power, authority rests on consent and, to some extent, "action in concert." Arendt's definitions of power and authority attempt to remove the question of sovereignty altogether by placing the solitary, self-assured acts of the sovereign outside the very definitions of power and authority. In her entire study *On Violence*, the term "sovereignty" only appears once, and furthermore, it appears in order to dismiss its relevance to power and authority. Discussing these definitions of

[116] Arendt, *On Violence,* 44.
[117] Arendt, *On Violence*, 45.

"traditional political thought" which she seeks to overturn, or reformulate (power and authority being central examples), Arendt writes, "these definitions... derive from the old notion of absolute power that accompanied the rise of the sovereign European nation-state."[118] Here, Arendt treats sovereignty as something out of the past, as an "old notion" attributed to an old model of governance. Arendt's attempt to remove the sovereign from her political thinking continues in her article. She derides the concept in "What is Freedom?" arguing, "A community founded on the sovereign would not be built upon sand but upon quicksand."[119] In "What is Authority?" she never even uses the word "sovereignty." In her efforts to articulate the power of community and imagine new politics, Arendt excludes the problem of sovereignty.

Readings of Rushdie can quickly arrive at a similar conclusion to Arendt: sovereignty, as "pernicious and dangerous" concept, needs to be dismantled and destroyed. In Arendt's reimagining of the manner in which political communities can be constituted, she enacts this dissolution of sovereignty before she even begins. She pushes the problem outside the limits of her theory. Rushdie's reimagining of self and authority similarly looks towards communal empowerment, validation, or confirmation, but his relationship to sovereignty differs. While Rushdie's critique of late-modern sovereignty arrives at a similar destination to Arendt's, their starting points are distinct. Arendt begins by declaring that acts of a singular sovereign remain outside the realm of what constitutes power; by starting with the problem of sovereignty behind her, left in the past. Rushdie, on the other hand, begins as well as continues into his novel with accounts and assertions

[118] Arendt, *On Violence*, 38.
[119] Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 173.

of this very singular sovereign power. Throughout *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie addresses the conflicts and contradictions that occur between the sovereignty of an individual and the power of a community. Even in the most utopian reimagining of community – the 1,001 "midnight's children" all born in the first hour of independence, all endowed with unique supernatural powers – Rushdie places the problems of sovereignty at the very beginning. Beginning with a new tower of Babel, a discovery of a language of platonic forms, Saleem's supernatural power is telepathy, the ability to unite the other 1,000 children: "language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words."[120] Urdu, Tamil, Hindi, Marathi, English, and the dialects of "the so-called teeming millions" all transform, like Boyd's reading of *Pale Fire*, into a "synthesis of radiant sense."[121]

Rushdie complicates these utopian, communal ideals by inserting the problems of authority and sovereignty. Internal and external acts of sovereign power desiccate the 1,001 infinite possibilities that the midnight's children could achieve. Not only does Rushdie include the imposition of the sovereign power of the state, culminating in the 1977 state-enacted sterilizations (and simultaneous loss of supernatural abilities), but far before this, he describes the internal bifurcations of the community that precede and work towards this sterilization in the novel. The preliminary bifurcation arises from his assumption of leadership, which Shiva resents. Following Saleem's attempts to offer an absolute meaning, even through democratic means, Shiva rejects him outright:

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[120] Rushdie, 192.
[121] Boyd, 220.

> [Saleem:]The thing is, we must be here for a *purpose*, don't you think? I mean, there has to be a *reason*, you must agree?... [Shiva:] What *purpose*, man? What reason in starving, man? God knows how many millions of damn fools living in this country, man, and you think there's a purpose?[122]

Saleem's assertion of "*purpose*" and *"reason,"* and assumption of authority (even that which seeks approval as Arendt describes), collides into the problem of sovereignty. Saleem's act of institution, which calls forth the midnight's children, assumes this authority to institute. Like the beginnings of the novels, authorial discourse must appear first without justification or "internal persuasion," to use Bahktin's term. Moreover, even Arendt's redefinition of the concepts of power and authority occurs at first through her assumption of authority, her ability to define and exclude. Despite the communal and utopian efforts of Arendt and Saleem's projects, avoiding the sovereign act of "self-institution" here remains impossible.

In the case of the midnight's children, Saleem's power and that of the community only persists through Mbembe's second action in the "two-fold process of sovereignty:" self-limitation. Saleem excludes Shiva in an effort to preserve the unity of the group. Saleem even goes as far as excluding Shiva from the narrative, admitting that he "lied about Shiva's death" as he approaches the conclusion, admitting he has "no idea where my changeling-rival went," and that he excludes him from the narrative and his life out of fear.[123] Rushdie's depiction of community here works only through deciding upon the exception and thus, the norm. Only through limiting his narrative world, can Saleem normalize and ensure a coherent, unified meaning. But he admits his fault here:

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[122] Rushdie, 252.
[123] Rushdie, 510.

> That's why I fibbed, anyway; for the first time, I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred.[124]

Contrary to Benjamin's constructive historiography, Rushdie argues that the past must be accounted for "as it really was." Unwanted past moments cannot be excluded within histories even in order to bring about and normalize a "better" future. As such, Rushdie binds himself and his novel with the problem of sovereignty. Instead of attempting to carry out the entire narrative dismissing the problems of sovereignty because the concept is an illusion and something only existing in the past, Rushdie demonstrates the ways that the application of singular authority has affected the past and continues to affect the present. In response to Arendt's effort to exclude the problem of sovereignty from her redefinitions of power and authority, Rushdie argues that this effort is equally illusory. The problem of singular authority remains a problem and will remain a problem; the "temptation of every autobiographer" like every novelist or historian, is to rewrite the past in order to bring about their ideal future.

By concluding their novels about the striving for singular, unified meanings along with the dissolution of sovereign power, Nabokov and Rushdie argue that late-modern sovereignty *as well as* the effort to dismiss it from the outset of political discussion are illusions. Only through performance, through maintaining an illusion, can sovereignty persist. However, the effort to maintain this illusion creates incredibly real consequences: "death worlds" and "topographical cruelties" in which "the lines between resistance and

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[124] Rushdie, 510.

suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred."[125] The ability to distinguish between a "better future" and a world that is even more bound to the past is not easily achieved. In asserting the indeterminate and contradictory status of the power of institution and limitation that work to bring about better futures, Nabokov and Rushdie show the manner in which they can quickly begin to resemble the past from which they are trying to escape.

As a result, the novels perform the effort to author a new future, but not without novelistic turns of irony. While the novels begin with authorial discourse, this discourse inevitability encounters ironic objectification and loses its "unconditional allegiance."[126] The novels not only perform efforts to obtain and sustain sovereignty, but also the dissolution and failure of sovereignty. In his effort to imagine a utopian community, Rushdie compares Saleem's realization of the extent of his telepathic power over the "midnight's children" to the "illusion of the artist":

> Because the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; that the thoughts I jumped inside were *mine*, that the bodies I occupied acted at my command; that, as current affairs, arts, sports, the whole rich variety of a first-class radio station poured into me, I was somehow *making them happen*... which is to say, I had an illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the as the raw unshaped material of my gift.[127]

Like Arendt's "illusion of the sovereignty of political bodies," Saleem's knowledge of himself through community becomes possessive and controlling. In his "illusion," he makes other's thoughts his own, he "occupies" and "commands" the bodies of others without any consent or concert. Everything external to him becomes "raw unshaped

[125] Mbembe, 40.
[126] Bahktin, 343.
[127] Rushdie, 199.

material" for his meddling. In this alignment of artist and sovereign, Rushdie turns his ironic gaze to the mechanisms of his own artifice.

The novels' performances of the dissolution of sovereignty demonstrate a revision of the teleological forms of historical narratives of the early twentieth century that still persist today. Nabokov ends *Pale Fire* without any enduring redemption. If anything can be certain in the ending, it is defeat. Kinbote ends as a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience," or perhaps just a lunatic, a madman.[128] The great futures contained in his constant idealization of his Zemblan past have not arrived. Similarly, Rushdie ends with the realization that in his process of pickling history, he must leave one jar empty. In their endings, there is no historical inversion, no Messianic era, not even an image of redemption. He concludes with the "privilege and the curse of midnight's children": "to be masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace."[129] Compared to Bahktin's broad historical narrative spanning the past and future, or Benjamin's "seizing hold" and "cessation of history," Nabokov and Rushdie's novels end with anti-teleological assertions. Compared even to Arendt's rearticulation of power and community, the novels appear less certain. By displaying the contradictions and indeterminacies of sovereign power, authority, and violence, Nabokov and Rushdie end with calls for the constant reassessment and dissolution of these "pernicious and dangerous" manifestations.

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[128] Nabokov, 301.
[129] Rushdie, 533.

CONCLUSION:
"THE END OF THE NOVEL"

I begin this conclusion by returning again to Bahktin's assertion that the novel (both the individual work and the generic whole) has "no first word… and the last word has not yet been spoken."[130] Looking broadly at the status of the novel as a historical genre both as Nabokov and Rushdie set out to write in the twentieth century as well as it stands today in the twenty-first, I would like to frame the particular endings of *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children* within a discussion of "the end of the novel" as a literary form. Bahktin's end for the genre was quite clear. For him, the novel provided the hope of a universal liberation from a bifurcated world: a lofty goal, to say the least. Lukács saw a similar end: the novel seeks to integrate a problematic society. This goal, though smaller, seems no more manageable. In Benjamin's aversion towards the novel in "The

[130] Bahktin, 30.

Storyteller," the exact opposite movement can be seen. Instead of unifying and integrating, the novel disintegrates its writer and its audience:

> The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. Even the first great book of the genre, *Don Quixote,* teaches how the spiritual greatness, the boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest men, Don Quixote, are completely devoid of counsel and do not contain the slightest scintilla of wisdom.[131]

Benjamin seizes upon the same problem that Nabokov confronts in *Pale Fire*. The irony of the novel can just as easily work negatively, making the world unknowable, as it can work positively towards a "synthesis of radiant sense."[132] "The boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest men" can be stripped of all of its power in novelistic discourse. Humanity becomes a collection of solitary individuals, "devoid of counsel" as well as community. With "the rise of the novel," Benjamin sees "the earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling."[133] Benjamin's typology offers an end of the novel that, contrary to the accounts before him, occurs with pessimism and failure – a cessation of happening without any Messiah.

The disillusionment or frustration with the novel that Benjamin expresses carries over into the latter half of the twentieth century and manifests itself in a variety of ways: The "anti-novel" is born with a turn away from plot and form and writers like Julio Cortazar have a field day. Distinguishing a singular or central plot, let alone interpretive mode, becomes impossible. Roland Barthes writes "The Death of the Author," arguing,

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[131] Benjamin, 87-88.
[132] Boyd, 220.
[133] Benjamin, 86.

"To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."[134] He severs the once seemingly indestructible connection between the novel and the novelist, history and the historian. Meanwhile, John Barth publishes "The Literature of Exhaustion," naming a dead-end (or near-dead-end) of traditional literary forms such as the novel. He describes the traditional notion of the single, solitary author or artist by calling it "an aristocratic notion on the face of it, which the democratic West seems eager to have done with; not only the "omniscient" author of older fiction, but the very idea of the controlling has been condemned as politically reactionary, authoritarian, even fascist."[135] In the light of a century that experienced the interaction of many of the world's languages and which did not end – as Bahktin would have liked – with each making the other "low" and "contemporaneous" or bring about a "*common view*,"[136] but rather violence and conflict, such condemnations of the novel, its author and its form can seem warranted and justified.

By speeding through these diverse intellectual positions, my intention is not to conflate them or to put them in the same camp, but rather to point towards one similarity. Frustrated with the form of novelistic narration and reception, these positions all follow the problem back to a century or more of historical realities of violent teleological

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[134] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148.

[135] It is important to note, however, that although many people interpret Barth essay as an end, or "swan song for the novel," he notes in his 1984 preface that this is not the point of the essay. Rather, he wrote the essay about the different ways contemporary literature can reflect on its own ultimacy and, in effect, create things new. John Barth. "The Literature of Exhaustion." In *The Friday Book, or, Book-Titles should be Straightforward and Subtitles Avoided: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Putnam, 1984), 65.

[136] Bahktin, 301.

speculations and sovereign assertions of primary, even singular meanings; what Barth labels "an age of ultimacies and 'final solutions.'"[137] As a result, in the age to follow, writing narratives offering any sort of solution seems flagrant, arrogant, and even dangerous. Looking at conclusions and endings in modern historical narratives, Hayden White argues that the act of narrativizing cannot occur without the act of moralizing. Every act of narrative arises from "the desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary."[138] The "closure of an image" of narrative, White argues, only occurs with the advancement of a similar closure of morality; an end to a narrative's internal dialogues about the ways in which the world can be perceived; a decision upon one way over others. In this manner, White endorses anti-teleological criticisms of the novel and takes the argument further, outside of the literary arts into histories and narratives of everyday life, justifying "non-narrative, even anti-narrative, modes of representation, such as the meditation, the anatomy, or the epitome."[139] Once again, like Benjamin, the novel here ends without redemption. It is a dead form, incapable of supporting life.

The comparison of Benjamin with these later derisions of the novel's structures of narration and revelation also reveals a central difference to the location of unified, or "full time." Benjamin retains a faith in the eternal power of the storyteller or narrator. Quoting Valéry, he writes, "'It is almost as if the decline of the idea of eternity coincided with the increasing aversion to sustained effort.' The idea of eternity has ever had its

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[137] Barth, 67.
[138] White, 23.
[139] White, 2.

strongest source in death. If this idea declines, so we reason, the face of death must have changed."[140] While Benjamin can look at "every second of time [as] the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter,"[141] ultimacy and finality take on a new meaning in the later texts as people begin to realize the extent to which death has become a mechanized process and the extent to which "death worlds" form politics. The "face of death has changed" and our ability to look at it in the eyes has lessened.

The turn towards anti-novelistic, anti-authoritarian, and anti-narrative modes of representation indicates another effort to look away from the face of death. Looking first at the anti-authoritarian argument, I will then indicate how it subsumes many of the arguments of the other two. In his anti-authoritarian conception of reading, Barthes posits a utopian view of text and reader:

> A text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination. The reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted.[142]

Barthes' conception of texts here does not part from the idea of the eternal, but rather relocates it. In contrast to Benjamin's conception of history in which the historian actively creates a unified reality, Barthes transfers this unity to the readers. "The reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without being lost, all the citations writing consists of." Instead of viewing writing as a process of making history "citable in all its

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[140] Benjamin, 93.
[141] Benjamin, 264.
[142] Barthes, 149.

moments,"[143] as Benjamin posited, the unity of the text occurs in the act of reading. However, in his syntax there is already a paradox. If the reader "is the space in which" unity is inscribed, then there is the problem of inscription. Who is doing the inscribing? Barthes would perhaps answer that it is nobody in particular; the processes of history and discourse do the inscribing. As if in the reader, unity already exists with very little assistance from the writer. This may be true, but if so, why is there still a need for literature? Barthes returns to an image of the world resembling Lukács' description of the "integrated civilization" of the Greeks, in which there is no disjunction between the individual and society and unity is given from the start.[144] Barthes seeks to preserve the belief in an eternal totality by dismissing the problem of calling this totality forward; that is, by getting rid of the problem of authorship. But then what do we make of authors, or of displays of singular authority?

In Arendt's political philosophy, as in Barthes' textual philosophy, she begins with an attempt to redefine or relocate power in order to preserve a unified concept. As Barthes shifts authorial power unto multiple readers, Arendt shifts power from the sole sovereign to the community. In her act of redefining "power" she institutes and delimits the scope of power. She asserts that violence and the application of a sovereign force are not actual manifestations of power, but rather "substitutions" for it. In so doing, Arendt in turn decides on the definitional exception, the norm of power. Furthermore, by defining "true" power as necessarily "the ability not just to act but to act in concert," Arendt

[143] Benjamin, 254.
[144] Lukács, 32.

attempts to offer or preserve a unified and stable understanding of power.[145] In her redefinition, Arendt seizes upon the past "as it appears in a moment of danger."[146] In her brief address of the sovereignty of European states (to which I referred in the final chapter), she admits that she is reversing past definitions of power, that her definition isn't "as it really was" in the past. In her efforts to dismiss sovereign power as outside the definition of power, Arendt must appeal to the sovereign acts of institution and limitation. In an effort to maintain unified, coherent concepts, the problem of sovereign power once again pervades.

Returning to endings of *Pale Fire* and *Midnight Children* and to "the end of the novel" as a genre, Nabokov and Rushdie similarly indicate the dissolution of singular authorities that have the power to make a novel coherent or advance a moralizing narrative of history. However, unlike Arendt or Barthes, who begin with the assumption that authority and power do not exist in any singular person, Nabokov and Rushdie begin with statements of singular interpretive modes and demonstrations of authorial discourse. The novels perform the dissolution of sovereignty precisely because sovereignty cannot be assumed to be absent. Non-sovereignty exists only at the end of the novels. In making this distinction between these two approaches – the assumption of non-sovereignty and the performance of non-sovereignty – I do not wish to raise one over the other. Arendt and Barthes are trying to imagine a new politics and new way of approaching literature: invaluable acts. Rather, by making this distinction, I would like to highlight the value of the contemporary novel. Unlike many other genres, the problems of authorship and

[145] Arendt, *On Violence*, 44.
[146] Benjamin, 255.

sovereignty are explicit in the novel. A novel demands an individual author. Films (or other "intermedia arts" as Barth names them), explode this idea; they demand "action in concert" from the very start. Those who denounce the novel as a "dead end art form" or criticize it for its solitary and fragmentary origins and effects miss perhaps the greatest opportunity that the genre provides. In making writers and readers constantly confront problems of authorship and sovereignty, the novel provides a space where these problems can be explored in new ways, reconfigured, where "the process of revision" can "be constant and endless."[147]

The reality of our contemporary moment in history is that the problems of sovereign power cannot be described as those which "accompanied the rise of the European nation-state"[148] and now can be set aside for more utopian, communal imaginations of politics. Though these re-imaginations remains useful, if not essential, in moving beyond violent pasts into the future, the novel, with its solitary author, allows for extended analyses of our present problems. *Pale Fire* and *Midnight's Children* end by performing the dissolution of authority and sovereignty because Nabokov and Rushdie both recognize the dangers of enforcing a teleological narrative, but they also recognize that authority and sovereignty cannot be entirely transcended or dismissed within contemporary debates on literature or politics. Nabokov ends his novel with Kinbote's fear of "a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus" who will come to kill him.[149] Rushdie ends "unable to live or die in peace."[150] For Nabokov and Rushdie, the

[147] Rushdie, 532.
[148] Arendt, *On Violence*, 38.
[149] Nabokov, 301.

novel cannot unite a bifurcated world, bring about an end to history or make the world "low" and "folkloric," but that does not indicate failure. Rather, the novel remains deeply embedded in the present, as one form of utterance among many others.

[150] Rushdie, 533.

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